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MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

MAY '40

UNUSUAL DETECTIVE STORIES

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MAY-1940

The Death Angel · Carrie Cashin · Norgil the Magician · The Keyhole, etc.

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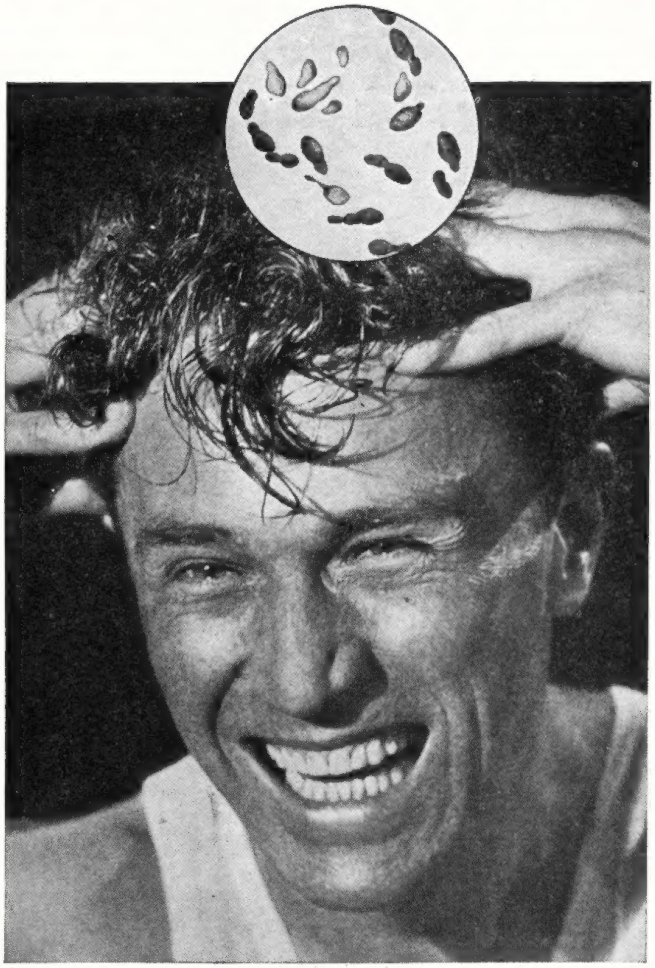

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STREET & SMITH'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

UNUSUAL DETECTIVE STORIES

JORDANS BACK ISSUE MAGAZINES 510 E. 5TH

CONTENTS FOR MAY, 1940 VOL. VI NO. 1

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COMPLETE NOVEL

THE CRACK OF DOOM . . . . . **Norman A. Daniels** . . **9**
Can men already dead be murdered?

NOVELETTES

TOO MANY GHOSTS . . . . . **Maxwell Grant** . . . **38**
Norgil the magician found them—in a haunted theater!

ANGEL'S WINGS . . . . . **Norvell W. Page** . . **55**
Facing death is just a workout for Angus Saint-Cloud!

DEATH LIGHTS A CANDLE . . . **Theodore Tinsley** . . **75**
And the flame lights the way to Carrie Cashin's success!

NO PROFIT IN MURDER . . . . . **Alan Hathway** . . . **92**
In fact the keyhole showed that there was quite a loss!

SHORT STORY

SHOULDER TO SHOULDER . . . . **Jack Storm** **113**
Mike Flynn fought that way—with a dead pal!

DEPARTMENT

BEHIND THE CURTAIN **6**
Backgrounds and inside dope on authors and stories.

COVER BY MODEST STEIN

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BEHIND THE CURTAIN

We feel that we've been giving our readers some mighty fine stories in this magazine, and the increased interest and constantly rising sales show that we are going along the right road to more reader-satisfaction than ever before. And, as a natural result of one good story, we get another; and after that another, and so on. It seems that writers, just as readers, like to flock to the good things, feeling that if their stories are published in a magazine which contains nothing but good stories, that gives them a better ranking in the profession. Which is quite true, and which is one reason why we are fortunate in continuing to get nothing but the best stories for Mystery Magazine.

In our next issue, Norvell Page gives us a real humdinger of a book-length novel, "The Red Pool," which will give you more thrills than you've had in a dog's age. Page has done the Death Angel novelettes which appear here from time to time, and one of which appears in this issue—on Page 55 to be exact. The novel in the next issue does not deal with Angus St. Cloud, but it has for its lead character another individual who will appeal to you even more than Angus does. We could go on to give you a slight idea of what the story is about, but it happens to be one of these near-perfect yarns which is so closely bound together that telling you one thing would require telling you another, and that would lead to still another until we had the whole tale told. What is best, therefore, is just to tell you that it will be a honey of a yarn for you; don't miss it!

The book-length in this issue is "The Crack of Doom," by Norman A. Daniels. It is an extremely interesting and unusual story, one which will make you hold on to your seat. You readers will probably also be interested in the cover illustration done by Modest Stein, showing the fear-crazed men. Stein, one of the best illustrators doing work today, was so intrigued by the story when it was given him for illustration that he decided to put himself into the cover. The lower right-hand character, therefore, will give you an idea of what Mr. Stein looks like when he's really scared.

Continued on page 126

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10
CENTS

by NORMAN A. DANIELS

A human fiend murders the living—and the dead!

A Complete Novel

CHAPTER I.

WHY MURDER THE DEAD?

Lieutenant Jack Ryan, on night detail in the homicide bureau, picked up the buzzing phone. The voice that greeted him was calm—almost too calm, for it contained all the elements of despair.

Ryan said, "Lieutenant Ryan of

the homicide detail, sir. Something I can do?"

"Yes. My name is Stephen Gates and I live at 208 Lancaster Boulevard. I don't want any confusion as a result of what I'm going to do. There probably are people who might have motives for killing me. Heaven knows I've been no saint. You see, lieutenant, I'm going to commit suicide. When you arrive, the front door will be conveniently unlocked. Good night, sir."

"Hey-hey, wait!" Ryan bellowed. "Listen, Mr. Gates, wait until I get there. What sense is there in killing yourself? What's bothering you that's so big that a good fight can't get the best of it?"

"My dear lieutenant," Gates replied, "I am grateful for your consideration of my life, but I am at the end of my rope. I can't fight what worries me because it has no material existence and yet, unless I go through with this, I shall die a much more horrible death. I know! Good-by, lieutenant."

Ryan heard the phone click. Lancaster Boulevard wasn't far from headquarters. He could reach it as fast as a radio car. Ryan sprinted out into the night, automatically checking the time as near midnight. He snapped on the siren of the detective cruiser and tore down the street at a furious speed.

Ryan seemed a little young to be a ranking officer of the homicide squad, but he had done some important and clever work which was repaid by a lieutenant's bars and badge. He turned on the spotlight, twisted it around and let the ray travel across the house numbers. Then he found what he wanted. Number 208 was reflected in its brass numerals set in a stone pillar which formed part of a high gate.

Ryan leaped out of the car, pushed the gate open and ran up a path. He saw that the house was big, which indicated wealth. Lights were on in some of the first-floor rooms. He didn't ring the bell, but pressed the door latch and, as Gates had stated, it opened quite conveniently. Ryan stepped into the house and instantly his nostrils widened. There was a distinct smell of cordite in the air. He was too late, then.

A moment later, the physical evidence that his fast trip was in vain lay before Ryan's eyes. In what seemed to be an elaborate study sat a gray-haired man. His left hand dangled at his side and it still clutched a gun. There was a bluish hole through the left part of his temple, but Gates had died peacefully. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be sleeping. An open book lying on the desk before him gave further false indication that this man was only resting. A safe, contained in a farther wall, yawned wide open and there were papers littering the floor.

Ryan merely felt the left wrist, knowing there would be no pulse. Then he looked around for a telephone and ambled into the big reception hall during his search. He found one there and picked up the instrument. Before he could dial a number, he heard a weird sound—one so eerie that it made his blood run icy-cold. It seemed to come from nowhere and yet everywhere. It rose and rose in intensity, finally to culminate in a terrific cracking sound. Then there was silence so vast that it became worse than the whining howl of that devilish visitation.

Ryan whipped his gun out of its holster and tried to figure out where the sound had come from. Automatically, he retraced his steps toward the room in which the dead

man sat alone. He parted the curtains at the doorway and for one full minute Ryan just stood. He couldn't move! Muscles and nerves were paralyzed!

The dead man sat in his chair, but his head lolled limply over on one shoulder now and there was absolutely no question but that his neck was broken.

"But who—what"—Ryan spoke aloud, hardly aware that he did so —"would break the neck of a dead man?"

He turned quickly and headed back for the phone. This time he didn't even reach the instrument before he found more action. Someone was walking across the porch—and on tiptoe. Ryan slipped against the wall so that when the door opened, he'd be concealed by it. He pulled back the hammer of his service pistol and winced at the loud click it made. He heard a key inserted in the lock. The intruder had ready access to the house then, and he didn't know the door was open. Someone pushed it open and a man of about forty-five, slender, wearing fairly thick glasses and with a decided slump to his narrow shoulders, walked in. At that moment Ryan stepped out from behind the door.

"Freeze," he snapped. "I've got a gun on you and this is the—"

The slender man seemed made of springy steel. He whirled around so fast that Ryan was too astounded to shoot. As that spin ended, the slender man left the floor. His light body struck Ryan's heavier one with enough force to knock him down. The gun went skidding across the floor until it hit a wall and bounded back, spinning crazily on the well waxed boards.

Ryan was no slouch as a rough-and-tumble artist. No policeman is, least of all those attached to the homicide squad. But this slender man was a human wild cat and he knew how to fight. His fists drove a series of painful punches to Ryan's midsection until the detective grunted in pain. Then he got in a husky right that snapped the man's head back. He wilted after that, and Ryan jerked him to his feet, flung him into a chair and sprinted after his gun.

"Now," Ryan thundered, "perhaps you'll tell me why you came into someone else's house at this hour of the night. Also just why you tried to bash in the head of a police lieutenant."

"Police lieutenant." The slender man looked up with a start. "But I didn't know. I thought you were a burglar—after Steve Gates' property. Why didn't you tell me? And where is Steve? What's happened?"

The man half arose and clawed at Ryan's coat. "Something's happened! It's Steve! It's happened, then. It's finally caught up with us. Tell me—in Heaven's name, tell me!"

Ryan pushed him back into the chair. "Listen, brother, you talk like Steve Gates did when he phoned me. He was afraid of something too, but he beat that something to it. Steve killed himself—with a gun. A minute before you showed up, something or somebody broke Steve's neck. Broke the neck of a man already dead, and I'd like an explanation of it."

"I . . . I'm Weaver—Edward Weaver." The slender man's lips trembled so badly he could hardly fashion the words. "I'm . . . I don't know what killed him. It's something . . . something out of the past. We knew it was coming. I . . . I'm afraid! I'm scared. You've got to protect me."

"Just stay put," Ryan said soothingly, "while I phone headquarters."

He walked over to the phone. Suddenly Weaver arose and quietly headed straight for the steps leading upstairs. He went up them three at a time. Ryan growled an oath and finished the call.

He was just hanging up when that same blood-thinning wail reached him. As before, it seemed impossible to trace, but it grew shriller and shriller. Weaver's voice broke through it in a wild, insane yell. Then there was that terrific cracking sound, more like the snap of lightning than anything Ryan could think of. He raced up the stairs, hesitated for a moment on the landing, and then noticed that one room was lighted. He bolted into it and stopped short.

Weaver lay in a heap just below a window. He seemed to be kneeling and the palms of his hands were flat against the floor. But his head! Ryan gulped. It was turned almost completely around. When Ryan eased the dead form to the floor, the neck twisted horribly. There was no pulse. Weaver had died instantly.

Ryan held his gun ready. He kicked open a closet door, searched it and found nothing. He stepped into the hallway, methodically lit all the lights and searched each room. Finally he returned to the chamber in which Weaver lay sprawled out. He opened the window and looked out. There was a tree about fifteen feet away. No one could have reached Weaver from there—nor from the gabled roof, which was much too high to negotiate without a rope ladder.

The wail of a siren brought Ryan back to earth. He'd never heard a siren sound so sweet. This place was rapidly getting his nerves on edge. With a suicide whose neck had been broken after death in the study downstairs, and a half-mad man whose neck had been broken in this room—by nothing, so far as Ryan could see—anyone might have gotten the jitters. He bolted down the steps, and as the door opened he got another shock. Four burly patrolmen shepherded a slip of a girl and a gray-haired man into the house.

"Caught 'em sneaking around outside, lieutenant," one of the patrolmen reported. "The dame was heading for the front porch and this other guy was slipping around from the back of the house."

"I'm Marla Scott," the girl said. "I've a right to be here. "I . . . I live here and work here. Mr. Gates is my employer."

"And you," Ryan said to the gray-haired man. "I suppose you're maybe the butler coming home across lots, huh?"

"I," the man replied calmly, "happen to be Walter Doyle. My brother also happens to be a judge of the circuit court in this State. Not that it should make any difference. I confess I was prowling around."

Ryan waved the patrolmen out of the house with instructions to guard all corners of it and not walk around too much. He looked at the girl again, saw that she was really pretty, with the bluest eyes he'd seen in months.

"What's your position in this household?" he asked bluntly.

"Lieutenant," Doyle broke in, "this has gone far enough. Marla is Gates' secretary. What on earth has happened here? Why are you in the house? Where is Gates?"

"He's dead," Ryan said simply. "With complications. Upstairs there's a man named Ed Weaver. He's dead, too—of the same trouble,

only a little simpler. I hate to put it so bluntly, but—there's no other way."

The girl turned away, tears welling into her eyes. Doyle seemed to have suffered a tremendous shock. He sat down weakly and beads of perspiration broke out all over his forehead. He regained his composure with a great effort.

"Lieutenant—you've got to work fast. There will be other deaths. Don't wait for explanations. Go to Louis Volk's home, just as fast as the car of yours will travel. I'm not sure of the number. Perhaps I'd better go—"

"I know where it is," the girl said. "I'll go."

Ryan led the way to the car and drove at breakneck speed in the direction she described. She talked rapidly, evidently trying to keep from breaking down.

"It's that horrible business in South America," she said. "They were all mixed up in it. Mr. Gates, Weaver, Doyle and Volk. Four years ago they all went down there on an expedition and they brought back a lot of stone gods and sacrificial altars. They never talked much about what happened down there, but each one had aged ten years when they came back. Right turn here, and the last house on the street. Please hurry!"

Ryan stopped the car, cautioned the girl to remain in it and press the siren button if anything happened. He raced up the path, leaped to the porch without bothering with the four steps. A faint light shone in the hallway. He rang the bell and pounded on the door at the same time. After half a minute he set his shoulder against the door and pushed. But it was oak, and heavy. He darted to a window, removed his hat and covered his fist with it. One mighty punch shattered the glass. He reached inside, released the latch and ran the window up. He slipped into the house, gun in hand, and stood listening. The silence was that of death.

He took about six steps toward the hallway when that same eerie wail began. Ryan was used to it now, and he judged that it came from upstairs. He bolted up the steps and as he neared the top, a wild shriek broke through the ever increasing crescendo of the inhuman wail. This time there was no mighty cracking sound. The wailing seemed to have been cut off abruptly. Ryan located the room from which he believed it had come. The door was locked. But this was no thick door. Ryan went through it with one lunge.

He landed in a room lit only by two candles. In their dim, flickering glow he saw a dark object sprawled out on the floor. Ryan reached the man's side in two leaps. He noticed that the position of the head seemed quite natural and when his fingertips pressed against the wrist, he found a pulse beating steadily.

Ryan raised the man, put him in a chair and studied the features. The man wasn't old, but there was a haggard look on his face, as though he had witnessed something too ghastly to define. A pair of nose glasses set precariously on his nose. Ryan left him for a moment and searched the room. There wasn't even a closet in it and only one door —which he had broken down. The window overlooked a lilac bush and a rock garden. It would be easy to see if a ladder had been used by the killer. Then Ryan glanced at the window lock. It was in place. Volk had literally been sealed in this room. No one could have possibly left it. Ryan felt a cool breeze waft

across the back of his neck and at that moment the candles flickered out.

CHAPTER II.

THE GHOSTS TAKE SHAPE.

He wheeled around, ready for anything, but only intense silence ruled the house. The unconscious man breathed lightly, but didn't stir. Ryan walked over toward the light switch, reached out to turn it on—and a strong hand closed around his wrist. At the same moment his gun was knocked out of his hand and an arm curled around his throat. Someone shoved a gun into the small of his back and a harsh voice whispered orders.

"You'll be a wise copper if you behave. We're turning on a flashlight, see? You walk down the steps and out the back door. There's a car parked near the garage, and you get in it."

Ryan made no reply, but he obeyed the orders. He'd have been a fool if he hadn't. He felt more relieved than worried over his capture. These men were ordinary thugs, and not something invisible. They were physical and therefore vulnerable—not like that wailing sound and its horrible crack which struck men down and left no clue.

Ryan was sure that at least one man remained in the house, probably searching it. He wondered if Volk would be murdered. Then he thought of Marla, waiting in the detective cruiser at the curb. Had she been taken also? He almost gave a sigh of relief when he found the sedan at the rear of the house, empty. He got in, and the two men squeezed in on each side of him. Guns were openly exposed. Three minutes went by before the third member of this trio rushed out of the house.

"This copper beat us to it," he said as he slid behind the wheel, "but he'll talk. Watch him—send a slug through his ribs if he makes a move!"

The car pulled out of the driveway, turned into the street and passed by the detective cruiser. Ryan saw no signs of Marla and his hopes fell again. Something had happened to her. He settled back and eyed his captors. They were strangers, probably out-of-town hoodlums hired for this work. No attempt was made to hide their course from Ryan, which meant that they didn't expect him to ever return. Ryan was beginning to wonder about that himself. The car left the outskirts of the city, rolled along a State highway for about eight miles and then pulled into a narrow, rutted lane. Like blackened fingers, the pillars of a farmhouse, long since destroyed by fire, stuck up into the sky. But there was a big barn behind the ruins, and the car rolled through the open doors. The driver got out, closed the doors and lit several lanterns.

"All right, you"—he waved his gun at Ryan—"get out and take it easy."

Ryan climbed out of the car, kept his hands high and sat down on an old soap box at the orders of the man who seemed in command of the trio. He was a burly, broad-shouldered thug with cruel lines etched into his face. The other two were the usual slender type of killer, handy with a gun, but yellow as a ripe pumpkin when disarmed.

The leader stepped close to Ryan. "It's this way," he said harshly. "You got what we want. Hand it over or tell us where it is, and you go free. Stall and we'll start off by bumping a few slugs into you where

One of the crooks made a dive toward the blaze—and Ryan veered to meet him, head on!

it will hurt and yet not kill you. Which is it, copper?"

Ryan crossed his legs and leaned back against the side of the barn. "Maybe," he said calmly, "if you'd tell me what I'm supposed to have, I could answer that question."

"You were in Gates' house plenty long enough to find that envelope. Weaver talked to you, copper. He must have had his stuff on him because it wasn't in his house. Volk's safe was open and we didn't do it. Nobody else knows about all this ex-

cept you, so come across—and live. Get wise, copper."

"Listen," Ryan said, "I don't even know what you're talking about. If Volk's safe was opened, this is the first time I knew it."

The thug glared at him, stepped back half a dozen paces and the gun in his hand jolted. A slug ripped by Ryan's ear and slammed through the wall of the barn. He reached up and brushed splinters of wood out of his hair. But Ryan's eyes and his brain had been busy every moment. Four or five feet from where he sat, one of the lanterns had been propped against an old stall. There was dry hay on the floor. Ryan suddenly leaped out of his chair. His foot caught the lantern, shattered the glass and hurled it to the floor. The killer's gun blazed again, but Ryan was in motion now and not such a good target. Already tongues of flame were licking greedily at the hay.

One of the crooks made a dive toward the blaze. Ryan veered to meet him, head on. The thug tried to raise his gun into a position for fast shooting, but Ryan prevented that and at the same time kept the crook's body before him, halting any intentions on the part of the others to open fire.

The burly leader of the pack suddenly dropped his gun. Wisely, he saw that it was impossible to shoot for fear of killing his own pal. But Ryan had no gun and he was forced to keep an encircling grip on his prisoner or be shot to death. Ryan's right hand dropped, seized his prisoner's wrist and twisted it. The gun fell to the floor. Flames were licking at their ankles now. Then the burly leader swept into the fight. He slugged Ryan a terrific wallop across the back of the neck. The detective let go of his man, gave him a hard shove and then turned to meet the bigger of the thugs. A fist smashed against his face, sending him reeling backward a step or two. Meanwhile, the third thug was busy beating out the fire and doing a good job of it.

Ryan ducked a wild swing, came out of his crouch with a leap and an outthrust fist. It caught the burly man squarely on the Adam's apple. The roar of rage that welled up from his throat was stifled by that blow. He dropped his guard, gurgled and raised both hands to his throat. Ryan moved in fast. He doubled the man up with two quick ones to the middle and then straightened him up with a pile-driving haymaker to the chin.

But that blow ended everything. As the burly leader crashed to the floor, two guns were pressed against Ryan's ribs. He raised his hands with a long-drawn-out sigh of defeat. The fire was licked too, and from this moment on, those killers would stay close and keep their guns ready. The burly leader was out cold. One of his pals raised him into a sitting position, slapped his face and tried to bring him out of it, but Ryan's punch packed plenty of steam. It would be five or ten minutes before this man would recover consciousness.

"Well," one of the other two men demanded, "you know what Red asked you. We ain't waitin' long for the answer."

Ryan shrugged. He couldn't even make an answer, for he hadn't the least idea to what these men referred. They were a type to carry out their threats, too. Ryan felt that he could count his minutes of life on one hand. Red, the leader, was beginning to groan and toss around. As soon as he awakened,

the end would come.

Two or three minutes went by and no one spoke. The guns were still pressed against Ryan's side and Red was rapidly coming out of his fog. He pulled himself up, looked around dizzily and then oriented his senses by a hard shake of his head. His eyes narrowed in hate when he saw Ryan. Fists clenched, he reeled up to the detective and sent one crashing into his face. But Red was weakened and the blow proved to be light. Ryan shook it off easily.

"We ain't got time to fool with this guy," Red announced. "Anyway, he's got it coming to him. I don't think he knows about them envelopes, and I don't care much anyway. There's other guys who have more of 'em. Stand back, boys. Hand me a rod and I'll show this copper how it feels to eat lead."

Red accepted a gun from one of his mates, spun the cylinder experimentally and moved back. Ryan braced himself for the impact of the bullets. He was watching Red's hand narrowly, waiting for the crucial instant when the finger would be white against the trigger. At that moment Ryan planned to leap straight into the face of the gun and take his chances on being stopped with a bullet. It was better than merely standing there like a dummy —to be slaughtered in cold blood.

He swayed forward, on the balls of his feet. Red was grinning in contempt, and sighting the gun. His two cohorts moved aside to be out of range and they watched the scene with open mouths.

Then, suddenly, the whole side of the barn was bathed in light. It streamed through two small windows set high in the walls. A siren began screeching and it seemed to come from directly outside the double doors of the barn. There was a terrific explosion which Ryan recognized as the discharge of a riot gun.

Red, stupefied by this quick turn of events, wheeled halfway around to meet his new danger. The other two killers rushed toward the door. Ryan already poised for a leap, went into action. Red saw him coming, fired once but aimed too high. Ryan was hurtling at him, arms outstretched. They closed around Red's legs and brought him down with a thud that knocked the wind out of him. Ryan crawled up over his body, measured him for a knockout blow and drove it straight toward the exposed chin. But Red selected that instant to make an attempt to throw Ryan off. The blow only glanced alongside his cheek.

The other two men had the doors partly open and were blazing away at the headlights of a car pulled almost up against the doors. No answering shots came. Ryan arose quickly, kicked Red's gun out of his hand and then skidded along the floor after it. His hand closed around the butt. Red saw what had happened, gave the alarm, and all three men darted out of the barn, choosing to take their chances against whoever lurked in the darkness outside, than face this detective who was more than ready to gun them down.

Ryan loped after them, saw their dim figures vanishing across the fields and hastened their departure with a couple of shots. Then he turned back to the car and recognized it as the detective cruiser he had been using. He yanked open the rear door and Marla almost fell out into his arms. She was still clutching a riot gun in shaking hands.

"Marla," he cried, "how did you get here?"

"Are . . . are they gone?" she asked. "I . . . I saw them take you. They . . . they went right by your car, but I was crouched down so they couldn't see me. I followed and . . . and I drove up here without lights. I heard them shooting, so I did the only thing I could think of. I turned on the lights and fired this . . . this awful gun which I found in back."

Ryan took both her hands between his own. "Nobody could have done better. You saved my life, and I'm very sorry about the way I questioned you at Gates' house. We'd better get away from here before those hoodlums decide to come back. I'll drive."

"Was Volk—dead?" the girl asked breathlessly as Ryan backed around.

"No—at least not when I left. Marla—what is that ghastly thing that kills men in locked rooms and leaves no trace except a broken neck? Gates must have told you something about all this."

"I . . . I don't know. No one knows. It's . . . it was uncanny, even when Mr. Gates was only telling me about it. You'd better ask Mr. Doyle. He knows everything."

CHAPTER III.

WHISTLING DOOM.

They found Doyle and two strangers in Stephen Gates' house. The fingerprint boys were dusting everything in the murder rooms. A medical examiner was making out his report.

"Amazing thing." He looked up at Ryan. "I've seen many cases of broken necks, but this seems to be the most complete and vicious of all. Whatever or whoever twisted the necks of those men crushed every bone, broke every blood vessel. A bullet through the heart couldn't have been a bit more effective—or quicker."

"Gates died of that gunshot wound through his head, though?" Ryan asked.

"Yes—he was dead when his neck was broken. I'm sure of that."

Ryan grunted something and walked over to where Doyle sat. The two strangers were introduced as McCray, a wizen-faced professor of ceramics. McCray was an expert on the art of ancient pottery. Burbank, the other man, was huge with massive shoulders, and eyebrows that ran in one continuous line across his forehead. He suggested vast power, and Ryan automatically glanced at his hands. They looked as though they could crush a steel ball between them. Murderer's hands—throttler's hands!

Then Doyle told a grim tale. Of how Gates, Weaver, Volk, Burbank, McCray and himself went to the Argentine on an exploratory trip. He told how they accidentally stumbled upon an ancient Indian city which gave up museum treasures worth a fortune.

"And we studied the habits of those ancient people, also," Doyle explained. "We learned that they offered sacrifices to their assorted gods. At first they presented small wooden images of their victims, hoping it would appease the gods. If it didn't, then the human sacrifices were made upon a high stone altar."

"Tell him what happened to our guide," Burbank growled.

"Yes—we had a native guide. One night he climbed up on a huge, flat-topped rock, fifty feet high, to examine it for us. I swear no one was close to that rock or on it. Yet the guide was found with his neck broken—just like Weaver's and Gates'.

And we found this in his pocket."

Doyle brought out a tissue-wrapped object, unpeeled the paper and displayed a small, cleverly carved image. The features were perfect and every detail in exact proportion except that—the head of the image was oddly twisted and a fine piece of hemp was looped around the neck like a hangman's noose.

"That," Doyle told Ryan, "is why Gates was so frightened. All of us received one of these images a week ago. We knew they portended death. Here—have a look at mine."

Ryan stared at the miniature likeness of Doyle. The work was without a flaw. Doyle's carved features were screwed up in agony, the head resting against the left shoulder and the noose drawn tight. Ryan repressed a shudder.

Professor McCray spoke in a shaking tremolo. "We've searched the premises," he said. "We know Gates received one of these minatures, but we can't find it. Someone must have stolen it."

Ryan walked into the murder room. Detectives had examined the wall safe, and found it had been opened with the combination. A desk in Weaver's house, where another squad was at work, had been searched also. Ryan hurried out to his car and drove straight to Volk's place. He was instantly admitted by Volk himself, who looked wan and tired. Under Ryan's questioning he verified everything that Doyle had told.

"It's a mysterious form of death," he went on. "Those sacrifices were accomplished in that manner. The victims were placed on the altar and in the morning they were dead—their necks broken. I don't know what it is. No one can say. But it came for me—that whistling death. I heard it, and I've aged twenty years."

He fussed with his nose glasses and seemed to have a little trouble keeping them on, for his face was covered with sweat. He had one of those horrible miniatures—in the room upstairs where he had almost been killed. But Volk refused to go up there, even with Ryan at his side. Ryan went alone.

As Volk had indicated, there was a small safe in one corner, and the door was locked. Ryan used the combination which Volk had given him, opened the door and propped up in one corner he saw the image of Volk. Ryan shivered at the sight of it. He picked the thing up, studied it intently and then placed it on the edge of a table. There were other things in that safe which intrigued him. Red and his killers had indicated they were after an envelope. Ryan saw a long legal-type envelope, sealed with red wax, in one of the safe drawers. He reached for it and at that instant every light in the house went out.

From downstairs he heard Volk's shrill yell of terror. Then it came—that eerie, low howl of death. Something flew by Ryan's face and he shrank back in the darkness. The sinister cracking sound didn't occur, and for a full minute there was nothing but a ghastly silence. Ryan drew his gun slowly, stumbled forward a few steps and reached for the spot where he had placed the image. It was gone! Yet he was certain no one could have possibly entered that room. Volk had subsided into a grim silence which worried Ryan. He headed for the stairs, started down them and heard a swishing sound too late to protect himself. A heavy object collided with his skull. He pitched forward, vainly grabbing the banister for

support. Then he was aware of rolling crazily down the stairs until everything faded and a blackness deeper than that of the house overwhelmed him.

His first sensation, upon awakening, was that of a bright light almost blinding him. He discovered that he lay on his back in the reception hall and directly above him burned that bright light. He arose very slowly, swayed for a moment and blinked his eyes. A moan from the room across the hall brought his wits back swiftly. He swept into that room, found the lights all on and saw Volk on the floor. He was groaning and massaging his throat. There was a livid welt that encircled the throat completely. Ryan helped the man onto a davenport.

"What happened?" Volk croaked when he regained his voice. "I don't know. I was alone in this room. Then—something—wrapped around my throat. The lights winked out a second before it happened. Where were you?"

Ryan grimaced. "Falling down the stairs. Someone slugged me. Come upstairs—I think that miniature of you is gone."

Ryan found the safe still open and papers hastily thrown on the floor. Besides the disappearance of the image—that red sealed envelope had also vanished.

"It was the finding of the museum scientists," Volk declared. "Just an engraved copy presented to me—and to all of us on that cursed expedition—as a reward for bringing back those museum pieces. Why should anyone want to steal it? Or that damned image, either?"

Ryan grunted, "If I could answer that, we'd probably have the solution to the whole affair. Stay here, Volk. I'm going to have a look around outside."

Ryan went out through the front door, walked around the house carefully, looking for any signs that an intruder might have left. Handicapped because he had no torch, Ryan still felt certain that no one had been prowling around. He was far at the rear of the house when he heard the sound of soft, quick moving feet. He ducked behind a bush, held his gun ready and waited. A towering figure loomed out of the night. Ryan stepped forward to meet it.

"Hold it!" he snapped. Then, when the man came closer, he spoke again. "So it's you, Burbank? Kind of unusual prowling around at this hour, isn't it?"

Burbank, the giantlike associate of the ill-fated expedition, grinned hugely. "You'll be putting the pinch on me for murder next. However, this just happens to be a usual walk for me. I live on the parallel street, and when I visit Volk, I just cut through the yards. He'll verify that if you wish."

"Doyle and McCray are safe, I hope." Ryan disregarded the thinly veiled challenge in Burbank's voice. "What do you know about McCray?"

"They're home in bed, so far as I know. McCray? Well, not much. He rarely talks. His whole interest is in his pottery and his carvings. Say—I hit on something that time. The man who carves these miniatures certainly is handy that way. But then again—the fellow who killed Weaver and Gates must have been a big, powerful guy, like me. McCray couldn't strangle a canary bird."

"He could use a garrote," Ryan said quietly. "There are no marks of human hands on the throats of the victims, Burbank. You'd better stay with Volk, and watch yourself.

The killer paid us a visit just a few minutes ago."

Burbank nodded his huge head and went into a loping run. Ryan hurried to the street, climbed into his car and headed for McCray's home. It was a suburban section and Ryan knew that McCray was a bachelor who taught his subject in college all day and worked in his private lab by night.

As he rolled down the avenue where McCray lived, Ryan thought he saw a familiar figure almost slinking along, keeping very close to the hedges and hunching his shoulders as if to prevent recognition.

CHAPTER IV.

INFERNO.

Ryan turned the next corner, stopped and doused his lights. Then he sprinted back toward the avenue in time to see the object of his curiosity break into a run as he passed beneath a street lamp. It was McCray, and he kept looking over his shoulder as if death might sweep down on him at any moment. Somehow Ryan had the same feeling. Because of the cleverly carved images, McCray was a logical suspect, but somehow Ryan couldn't visualize this thin, wizened, prematurely-old man as a killer. Ryan let him get about a hundred yards ahead, and then he took up the difficult task of following him.

McCray kept on going and when he drew closer to his home, he practically ran the rest of the way. But he was forced to pass through a small park, maintained by this neighborhood for its children. Here his way grew dreary and much darker, for there were no street lamps. McCray hesitated, as if wondering if he should take the chance. Then he hunched his thin shoulders again and actually ran this time. Ryan was after him, gun in his fist now, for more and more he realized that McCray's fears were by no means unwarranted.

Then, with darkness closed in around him, Ryan heard death's whistling, swishing preamble. McCray's voice rose in a shriek which was cut off as abruptly as though he'd been swallowed up. That sinister, blood-chilling crack came again. The crack of doom! Then silence, and nothing else. Ryan saw McCray's form lying in the middle of the path, but there was little doubt in his mind but that McCray was dead.

Ryan veered left and started to make a circle of the area, hoping against hope that he'd bump into the murderer—if he really existed in the flesh. Ryan found no trace of anyone. He returned to where McCray lay sprawled out. It was almost dawn, and a heavy dew had settled.

He examined McCray, saw the livid welt around his neck and felt no response where a pulse should have been pumping away. Ryan straightened up. For all he knew that whistling sound might occur again at any moment and he might not hear the crack which signaled the death of a new victim—for Ryan had a growing idea that he might be next on the list of this ghostly assassin.

The heavy fall of dew gave him an opportunity to study the area, using the weak light of many matches. When he had finished, Ryan was positive of one thing—no human being had been close enough to McCray to use a garrote nor any other ordinary instrument of murder. Except for the print of his own shoes and McCray's, there wasn't a mark to indicate anyone else had been in

the vicinity. But he kept on looking, gradually increasing the distance between himself and the spot where McCray lay dead.

There was a children's playground nearby, about fifteen or eighteen feet from the scene of the murder. Ryan almost stumbled over a sand box. He lit another match, held it high and drew a sharp breath. Someone had smoothed out the sand after the park closed, for every grain of it was leveled off except for a strange, curving line much like that which a huge serpent might make.

Ryan recalled that after Weaver and Gates had died, their homes were invaded. Perhaps the same thing might happen to McCray's place. There was no time to lose, not even time enough to call in and have McCray's body taken care of. Ryan sprinted through the park, heading toward the professor's house. It proved to be a one-story bungalow, rather isolated from its neighbors. Not a light shone in any of the windows.

Ryan reached the back door, found it locked, but equipped with a cheap lock which opened readily to his pass key. He stepped into a small kitchen. Somewhere deeper in the house the floor squeaked. Ryan moved softly forward. His hunch had been right. Someone was looking for McCray's carved image and the papers presented to him by the museum.

He stole through the dining room, crossed the hall and was confronted by the entrance to a study. A tiny ray of light cut the darkness and centered on a small wall-safe. Ryan couldn't see how many men were in the room, for not a word was spoken. He smiled thinly, took a firmer grip on his gun and headed through the door.

Something tugged at his ankles. He gave a lurch forward, lost his balance and pitched headlong to the floor. Instantly someone came hurtling down on him. His gun hand was pinned to the rug and the weapon pried loose. A square-toed shoe kicked him in the temple and then he was jerked to his feet and hurled onto a sofa. The tiny pencil of light flitted across his face.

"So it's the smart dick again!" This was Red's voice, sneering and angry. " We figured you might show up, sucker, so we fastened wires across a few doorways. I'm glad you came, because now I can finish what I started to do in that old barn. Sit tight, copper. This time I'm personally keeping a gun on you. Boys —get busy again. Find that envelope if you have to tear the joint down piece by piece. And step on it. The professor might show up any minute, and we'd have to knock him off too."

Ryan almost grunted in surprise. Then these men didn't know that McCray was dead, a victim of the whistling death. Perhaps there were two forces at work—one which killed silently and without leaving a clue; the other, these gangsters who sought certain envelopes.

They got the safe open after a few moments and quickly ransacked it. Curses indicated that what they sought wasn't there. Then the two men began a systematic search of the house. When they finished, Ryan could distinguish everything in the room, for dawn was coming in, gray and chilly.

Red, fuming with rage, gave the orders to stop the search. "We'll fix two things at the same time," he said. "If we can't find the envelope, we'll see that nobody else does and that's just as good. Listen, boys, there's an oil burner in the cellar.

Carry up plenty of fuel and spill it all around the place. I'll take this dick into the cellar and tie him up. We'll fire the place and let him roast in the ashes. Snap it up—this whole neighborhood will be awake in an hour or less. We want the fire to be going good before anybody sees it."

Ryan arose at the pressure of the gun against his spine. He was forced down the cellar steps and backed against the wall. He watched Red's two aids carry up several gallons of fuel oil and heard them sloshing it around the floor. When they returned, Red kept Ryan covered while they proceeded to tie him up with wire. A gag was thrust into his mouth and fastened there. Red tripped him, kicked him in the ribs half a dozen times and grinned in evil pleasure.

"In two minutes, copper, this joint will be blazing like a furnace. Before anyone even sends in an alarm, the whole place will come down on you. Know where I got the idea? You seemed to like fires, the way you kicked over that lantern in the old barn. Now you can have all you want. Let's go, boys."

They ran upstairs and before the door closed on them, Ryan was rolling across the floor toward a workbench that ran the entire length of the large cellar. He could see McCray did most of his after-hour labors here. Vases were piled high in one corner. There was an electric oven for setting the clay, all kinds of instruments for carving it and—several blocks of wood about the same size as those gruesome images. On a revolving platform, McCray had evidently been at work on a new vase, duplicating some historic one which stood on a small dais.

Ryan could hear the fire taking hold. It was roaring through the house already and smoke seeped down through the cracks in the floor. If he was to get out of this cellar alive, he had to do it within the next five minutes. This time there was no pretty, blue-eyed girl to help him.

Ryan rolled over to the wall beside the bench, set his back against it and used every ounce of strength he possessed to slowly push himself to his feet. This accomplished, he hopped toward the bench. There was a vise attached to the edge of it. He turned around very slowly, forcing himself to remain calm. Tears rolled down his cheeks because of the smoke that was now thick in the cellar. Every few seconds a section of floor burned through and sent flaming débris onto the cement floor. But fire wouldn't sear wire bonds. Red had been careful enough to remember that little detail.

Ryan backed up against the bench and his fingers clawed over its surface until he grasped one of McCray's carving tools. Hardly daring to breathe, he lifted it, moved forward slightly and by almost throwing his shoulders out of their sockets, he managed to set the tool in the jaws of the vise. A couple of turns, and it was held fast. He quickly maneuvered the tool between the wires and his wrist. Then he sawed as fast as he could. Once he almost fell, but the tool in the vise kept him from plunging to the floor.

Two feet above him the wooden floor was rapidly being consumed, and the heat was terrific. It seared the skin on his face. He smelled his hair burning, but he kept on grimly sawing away. At the far end of the cellar a whole section of floor came crashing down. Then one wire gave

under the steady sawing against the sharp instrument. Ryan set his jaws, leaned forward and exerted all his weight and strength on the bonds. Under this pressure they gave way and he fell forward on his face. But his hands were free. He ripped the gag out of his mouth, attacked the wire around his ankles and then leaped toward one of the small cellar windows. He raised it, drew himself up and through the small aperture and breathed in cool, untainted air. For two or three minutes he lay on the ground, exhausted. Then he heard part of the wall begin to cave in, and he staggered to a safer spot.

Fire apparatus arrived soon after, but the raging inferno was too great. Already the small building was a total loss. Ryan watched them pour water into the flames, but for the most part they consigned their efforts to keeping the blaze from spreading.

"He did a good job," Ryan told himself. "Red made certain that no one else would ever locate that envelope. But there are others. Doyle must have one—and Burbank, too. I'm not licked yet."

McCray's body had been found during the excitement that attended the fire. A squad of detectives had gathered around it, and the black morgue wagon was pulled up beside the corpse. Ryan, as ranking officer, took charge. His first act was to examine the children's sand pile again. But now that odd pattern which resembled the track of a serpent was badly broken by the feet of prowling policemen searching for clues. Ryan sighed and turned away. He had one of the squad cars take him back to the city and in the privacy of his office he phoned Doyle's house. A deep, rather familiar voice answered. Ryan felt his hopes sinking again.

"Oh, it's you," the voice said in answer to Ryan's query. "Sure, it's Cassidy. There's been a break in Doyle's house during the night. Somebody busted his safe wide open and practically wrecked the joint. Killed? No—Doyle is O. K."

Ryan hung up, grabbed his hat and traveled fast to Burbank's house. The big man let him in, merely nodded a greeting and led the way into his study. It looked as though a tornado had gone through it. Most of the burglar's efforts were centered around the desk, for Burbank had no safe. The drawers had been pulled out and their contents dumped on the floor.

"Did they get it?" Ryan asked blankly.

Burbank nodded. "I'd like to know what made those reports so damned important. This must have taken place while I was at Volk's. I stayed there a few minutes and when I came back, I found this."

"You're lucky," Ryan said. "McCray got himself a broken neck. He's dead. Whatever killed him just flashed out of the night. I was right behind him, and nobody got near McCray. I can swear to that. I think I'll go to the museum which issued those papers. There must be something in them which makes murder, arson and robbery worth while."

Ryan didn't go to the museum at once, however. Instead he drove to Stephen Gates' home and found Marla straightening out the affairs of her dead employer. Ryan asked a few pointed questions and learned that Gates had been a very superstitious man. During the Argentine expedition he had fought against raiding the ancient city of its museum treasures for fear of offend-

Ryan forced the man to give ground, then gave a quick twist to the wrist that held the knife!

ing those men and women so long dead.

"Mr. Gates," Marla went on, "was more than willing to risk another expedition, though. They hadn't completed a thorough search of the ruins. He mentioned that the original party was going to sail for South America sometime this year."

"Maybe," Ryan mused, "somebody didn't want them to go. Look, Marla, every one of those men received engraved findings about the pieces they presented to the museum. In each case these papers were stolen. Did you ever get a look at Gates' papers?"

She shook her head. "Never. A Dr. Janssen issued those findings. I remember his name well, because Mr. Gates attended his funeral last week."

"What?" Ryan gasped. "Tell me about Janssen. What happened to him?"

Marla thoumbed through a stack of newspaper clippings and handed one to Ryan. It told a cryptic story of Dr. Janssen's death. He had

stepped from the curb and crossed the street against traffic lights. A taxi had struck him and he had died of a fractured skull an hour later. The taxi driver had no record, had told an honest story and there had been no charge. Ryan made a note of the taxi driver's name and address.

He cautioned Marla to be careful, hurried out of the house and drove to the hackman's address. It proved to be a cheap boardinghouse. The front door wasn't locked, and Ryan went in. He noticed several mail slots, got the number of the taxi driver's room from one of them and located it on the fourth floor. He raised his hand to rap the panels, but hesitated. Muffled voices came from inside the room, and one was familiar. Red, the thug who had twice tried to murder Ryan, was speaking in boastful tones. Ryan couldn't make out the words, but there was a satisfied smile on his face. The death of Dr. Janssen hadn't been an accident. It was deliberate murder, cleverly fashioned so that no suspicion would be raised against the taxi driver. Ryan tried the door gently, found it locked and set his shoulder against the panels. He gave a violent shove. The cheap lock cracked and the door banged open.

Red and three other men sprang to their feet. Ryan's weapon came up to cover them. Red grabbed a large, cracked water pitcher and flung it straight at Ryan's head. The detective ducked, avoided the missile easily, but the fraction of a second which this act required gave the crooks an opportunity to put up real resistance.

Two of them flung themselves at Ryan. Another brought out a gun from a shoulder clip. Ryan fired point-blank. The man with the gun staggered back, clawing at his shoulder, and toppled across the bed. Then the other two were upon him. Ryan took a right drive that clipped him across the chin. He went back a few steps, cleared his head and charged. He could have shot both men down, but as yet they hadn't drawn their weapons, believing that their combined weight could easily overpower the detective. Red kept yelling orders for them to stand back so he could start shooting, but Ryan gave them no opportunity to do that. He fought close, keeping the men between himself and Red.

He still gripped his gun and used it in wide, slashing blows. His fist connected with the jaw of one thug and knocked him clear across the room. The other began to give ground, and Red maneuvered into a position for quick shooting. Ryan saw that. He raised his own gun and snapped a shot in Red's direction. The thug leader yelped in alarm and suddenly changed his tactics. He waltzed over to a window, raised it and climbed out on a fire escape. Ryan tried to wing him, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the crook he had knocked in a corner getting up and drawing a knife from a holster hidden beneath his coat.

With a wild yell of rage, this man came hurtling at the detective. The knife started a slashing upward drive meant to slice Ryan wide open. Ryan gave ground until the killer's knife hand was raised high and the thrust failed to find a target. Then Ryan barged in. He dropped his gun, hammered a series of fast ones over the killer's heart, ducked another stab of the blade and closed one of the killer's eyes. Slowly he forced the man to give ground and then, with a sudden lunge, he caught

the knife hand in a steely grip. He twisted the wrist hard, heard a crack, and the killer howled in pain. Ryan stepped back a pace, wound up a haymaker and sent it home.

He retrieved his gun, saw that only the knife man and the wounded crook were left, and hurried to the window. There was a fire escape handy. He looked up in time to see a pair of legs going over the rooftop. Ryan clambered out and started up the iron stairway. A gun blazed, and lead struck one of the metal slats, ricocheted wildly and missed Ryan by inches. His own gun exploded twice, and there was no more shooting from the edge of the roof.

He raced up the fire escape, cautiously raised his head above the edge of the roof and saw Red sprinting across the level surface to make a flying leap for the roof of the next-door building. Red's mate apparently had orders to cover his retreat, for Ryan saw a gun muzzle project from around a chimney and ducked just in time to avoid the slug.

He stuffed fresh cartridges into his weapon. He drew himself erect suddenly and blazed away at the chimney until his gun was empty. But as he fired, Ryan charged toward the spot. The thug stepped out, gun in hand. Ryan gave a leap and the astounded crook was too stunned to shoot straight. He went down under the impact of Ryan's weight, and howled for mercy. Ryan straddled him, circled his wrists with handcuffs and grabbed the crook's gun. He ran over to the farther side of the roof just in time to see Red smashing a skylight and vanishing through it.

Ryan returned to his prisoner, escorted him below and found the house full of radio patrolmen who had come in answer to several alarms. The other two men, including the taxi driver, were handcuffed. Ryan pushed the hackman into a chair.

"You're under arrest for murder. Dr. Janssen didn't step out in front of your cab. You ran him down. Who paid you to do that? Talk, you rat."

"Nobody saw it," the driver retorted sullenly. "There ain't no witnesses, so you gotta take my word. You can't pin that rap on me."

"Maybe not," Ryan replied, "but you were carrying a gun and a knife. That's good for about five years. You tried to use both weapons on me and that'll get you ten more. If you're fool enough to take that rap for Red's sake, it's all right with me. But Red ran out on you. He didn't stay to fight, and you're left holding the bag."

"Yeah"—the taxi driver glared in anger—"he did. I always thought he was a rat. O. K.—here it is. Red paid me to help him snatch the Janssen guy. I figured that was all there was to it—a snatch. But when I started to pull up to grab him, Red jumped outa my hack, socked the old duck and threw him in front of my cab. That's the truth. I didn't mean to kill him. Red said if he put this old guy away for a few weeks, we'd have more gold than is buried at Fort Knox."

"Take them away," Ryan ordered. "Find out who this Red really is and send out an alarm for him. I'll file charges later on."

Ryan didn't wait to watch the prisoners led away. He bolted out of the house and headed for McCray's fire-ruined bungalow. Heedless of the damage to his clothing, Ryan poked around the charred ruins until he made his way into the cellar where he had so narrowly avoided

death. The material on the workbench was intact for the most part, and the clay urn which McCray had in the process of manufacture was still on its spindle. He found a small hammer, smashed the half-finished urn and grunted in satisfaction when he saw something white buried inside the dried clay. He cleared away sections of the urn until he had a sealed envelope in his hands.

He ripped it open, studied the contents and especially studied the small map appended to the last page. He stowed the papers into his pocket very carefully and returned to headquarters. He worked there for more than an hour, but deep study of the document for which several men had died revealed nothing illuminating. It was merely a technical report giving probable dates during which the ruined Argentine city had flourished; detailed descriptions of the pieces donated to the museum—and finally the map. Ryan sent a lengthy wire, bolted the first food he'd tasted in hours, and went to the museum.

It was dark when he approached the place, and the museum itself was closed. Ryan punched the bell at the side of the big door and a watchman let him in.

"There's a gentleman working in the American-history wing," he answered Ryan's questions. "I don't know his name, but he's come here often, sir. He was a great friend of Dr. Janssen."

Ryan walked through the vast halls of the museum. On all sides of him were relics of the past. Sacrificial altars, huge stones containing fossils ages old, various stautary discovered by explorers from one end of the continent to the other. Then Ryan reached an office and laboratory. He pushed open the door. Walter Doyle sat in front of an old-fashioned rolltop desk, searching every cranny of it. Papers were heaped high in front of him.

Ryan let the door close with a thud and Doyle spun around in the swivel chair. One hand darted toward his coat pocket, and then hesitated. He licked his lips and fashioned a sickly grin.

"Hello, lieutenant. I didn't expect to see you here."

CHAPTER V.

THE SIGHING DEATH STRIKES.

Ryan pulled a chair close to the desk, straddled it and looked at Doyle thoughtfully for a moment. "Find what you've been looking for?" he asked.

Doyle leaned forward. "You've got the wrong idea, lieutenant. What I hoped to find is legally my property. The other members of the expedition and I gave Dr. Janssen a map which shows where that ruined city is located. No man could ever find it again without that map—not even me, who stumbled on it. I think that Gates, Weaver and McCray were murdered in order that their copies of that map could be stolen. Volk, Burbank and myself were more fortunate, but—every copy of that map is missing! I've made up my mind to visit the ruined city again and I will—if I must search for it all over again without a map. Janssen must have the original copy somewhere. It's my only hope. Even the engraving plant where the copies were made up was destroyed by fire a week ago."

Ryan nodded. "Yes, I know. I checked on that myself. But you're wrong about every copy being gone. McCray must have sensed that those murders were committed to gain possession of the documents, and he

proceeded to hide his. The cracksman and crooks assigned to get those copies couldn't find a trace of McCray's, so they fired his house to destroy it if it was hidden. I reasoned that McCray might have concealed his copy in one of his clay models. There happened to be one in the process of construction in his workshop and—here is what I discovered inside it."

Ryan threw the documents on the desk. Doyle seized them almost avidly. "Lieutenant—it's all we need. Now I can return to the lost city and study it until I find out why these papers are so precious. And I'm going back. Nothing can stop me."

"Except the sighing death," Ryan reminded him. "Don't forget that. Now let's get out of here and put the map and papers in a safe place."

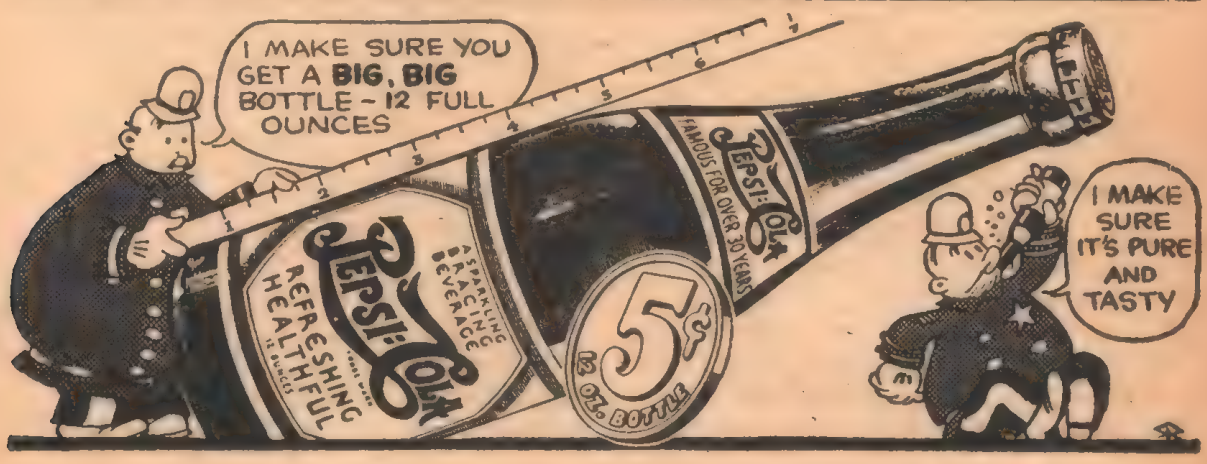
Ryan stuffed the papers into his coat pocket, led the way out of the office, and Doyle extinguished the lights. The whole museum was dark. The great skylight windows might as well not have existed, for there wasn't even a star in the sky. Ryan turned on a flashlight, swept away the gloom and instructed Doyle to remain close by him. They turned a sharp corner and started to cross the wing in which the Argentine treasures were placed.

The high altars, the pedestals and statues threw weird shadows across the floor. Ryan's flashlight moved from side to side. Suddenly it wavered and came back to rest upon a gruesome object. It was the watchman. There was a jewel-handled dagger driven hilt deep in his back. Ryan quickly drew his gun. He hurried over to the dead man and made certain he was beyond help.

Doyle pointed to the knife with shaking fingers. "That . . . that knife! We brought it from South America. We . . . we found it on top of that altar where our guide was killed. Lieutenant, we've got to get out of here."

Ryan handed Doyle his flashlight. "You're packing a gun, Doyle. Use it if necessary. Go back to the office and phone headquarters. Tell them to send all the men they can spare to cover the whole building. Our killer is here to get his hands on that map. Come on, man, pull yourself together and travel."

Doyle accepted the flashlight and began running back toward the office. Ryan straightened up very slowly, cocked his gun and listened for any signs that might give away the presence of an intruder. The motley shadows cast by these museum pieces were no help. Ryan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tiptoed around one of the flat-topped altars, ran his hand over the surface of it and located a carved-out hollow in which the victim's blood gathered. He shivered. The flickering flash in Doyle's hand had disappeared from sight. Ryan decided to edge his way toward the big doors of the museum and block the escape of anyone inside.

Then he had a hunch. He crouched behind the sacrificial block and quickly removed his coat. He crept forward on hands and knees, toward a life-sized alabaster statue of some prehistoric god. He hastily wrapped his coat around the statue's shoulders, jammed his hat over the head and then ducked once more.

Two or three minutes crawled by. Then Ryan's skin prickled and he almost forgot to breathe. From somewhere in the gloom of this huge building came the sighing sound of death. It began to grow in intensity until there was a terrific crack. Ryan saw the head of that alabaster statue vanish from sight. Then it hit the floor and shattered to a million pieces. Ryan's gun blazed a jet of flame, but he had no target. He was merely shooting to frighten away whatever wielded that sighing death. He wondered where Doyle was. The man should have returned minutes ago.

Something fell with a crash at the farther end of the huge room. Ryan began running in that direction. He found that a display case had been toppled over. Then he groaned aloud and headed back to the spot where that sighing death had originated. He reached the alabaster statue and quickly removed the coat he had draped over it. He thrust his hand into the pocket. The documents he had found at McCray's ruined bungalow were gone!

Two minutes later a flash of light indicated that Doyle was returning. Ryan ran toward him and without a word, pinned the man against the wall and rapidly searched him. He did not find the missing papers.

"But . . . but I don't understand," Doyle protested. "I put in your phone call all right, and I got lost on my way back here; there are so many turns. Why did you search me?"

"I figured the sighing death would probably be waiting in the darkness to break my neck," Ryan said in a strained voice. "So I put my coat and hat on one of those statues. It came all right—took the head clean off the statue. Then I was tricked away from the spot and—someone took the map and the papers. I just wanted to be sure you didn't have them."

A score of radio cars rolled up to the museum. Men poured into the big buildings, and all lights were turned on. Ryan helped in the search, but knew it was hopeless from the start. There were several exits through which the killer might have passed.

Doyle was a physical wreck. "Lieutenant," he said, "I've decided that I won't go back to that ruined city—not even if you find the map. All it's brought is death and violence. Whatever killed my three friends and broke the head of that statue isn't earthly. It didn't have to pass through any of the doors to escape. Doors, walls, bars—anything is no obstacle to start that terrible death. Gates was right! We should have let those ancient relics alone. I'm through! I'm going as far away from here as possible. Nothing can stop me."

"You're going to stay," Ryan said grimly, "until this is cleared up. You can suit yourself whether it will be in the comfort of your own

home or a jail cell. Now get a grip on yourself, man. I want you to look at the dead watchman again. I'm especially interested in the dagger that killed him."

Doyle reluctantly accompanied Ryan to where the watchman was sprawled out in death. He looked at the dagger for a second and then averted his gaze.

"Yes—that's the dagger, all right. Our guide found it somewhere among the ruins. It was on top of that high altar where the guide was killed. He must have droppd it there. We presented the thing to the museum. What makes it so important? It's just a sacrificial knife. There are a number of others on display here."

"This knife," Ryan said thoughtfully, "is set with jewels, and the handle is undoubtedly made of gold. Nobody seems to know where the guide found it. Let's suppose there were other knives like this—probably even larger—with more valuable stones set in the handles. Those are real jewels, Doyle. Enough of them would make a man wealthy beyond all his dreams. I think our unearthly sighing death has some materialistic ambitions, Doyle. Now you go on home. I'll send a police escort with you and have you guarded every moment."

"No," Doyle drew himself erect. "That isn't necessary, lieutenant. I'm not afraid any longer. I'll take a taxi home, and don't worry about me. I still have my gun."

Ryan sat down on the edge of one of the altars and lit a cigarette. Doyle certainly had recovered his courage fast enough. Why? Because Ryan had offered a guard and Doyle didn't want to be guarded? Ryan glanced at the decapitated statue and shivered. That might have been himself. Death seemed to be striking closer every time. The next attempt might be successful. Ryan thought of Burbank, the brawny giant of a man. Some tremendous force had cut the head off that statue. Burbank had the muscles to perform such a deed.

CHAPTER VI.

RED-HAIRED CLUE.

Ryan walked back to the office in which he and Doyle had discussed the case. He studied the room and noticed a grilled ventilator set high in the wall. He traced this into the engineer's room not far back of the office and discovered that it was possible for a man to crawl along the ventilator and, crouched behind the grillework, to overhear every word spoken in the office.

With his flashlight, Ryan sprayed the metal tube and examined every inch of it. The ventilator made a sharp twist about eight feet from the office. Here the joints were roughly soldered together, leaving several sharp edges

Ryan saw several strands of human hair clinging to one of these. He picked them off, wrapped them in his handkerchief and returned to the office. There, in proper light, he saw that the hairs were auburn.

"Red," Ryan grunted. "He listened to me tell Doyle about the map. He slipped back into the museum and stole the papers out of my coat pocket. But is Red responsible for the sighing death?"

Ryan didn't have time to ponder any further on that puzzle. A patrolman hurried in and handed Ryan a sealed envelope.

"Guy gave it to me out front. Says it was to be delivered to you at once. Kind of a funny guy he

was—I never saw his face, because he had a wide black hat pulled down over his nose."

Ryan broke the seal, unfolded the letter inside and as he read it, the lines of his face went starkly grim. His eyes narrowed to slits and his big hands curled into massive fists.

Detective Lieutenant Ryan:

You have what I seek. I have the girl Marla. At midnight you will appear alone at the warehouse near Pier 70. I shall know if anyone accompanies you and the girl will die immediately. Turn those papers over and she goes free. What happens to you depends solely upon how you accept my terms. This is no crank note and Marla is appending a postscript to prove it.

Then, in a shaky hand, was Marla's addition to the letter.

He means it. Please come for me.

Ryan thrust the letter into his pocket, grabbed the phone and called Volk's house. There was no answer. He dialed Burbank and the huskiest member of the ill-fated expedition seemed more than willing to answer Ryan's questions. But he knew nothing and hadn't seen Volk or Doyle. Ryan then got Doyle on the wire.

"I'm quite all right," Doyle said. "Volk? He wasn't at home, because when I returned, he was waiting for me to talk over our new expedition. I told him what happened at the museum and, like me, he has decided not to risk another trip."

Ryan hung up, bolted out of the museum and proceeded straight to headquarters. He rushed into the supply room and requested a bullet-proofed vest. With this tucked under his arm he visited his office long enough to read a telegram which had come for him. Then he drove at a furious pace directly to Volk's residence.

He glanced at his watch as he hurried toward the porch. Within one hour he had to keep a rendezvous with death so that Marla might live. Not for one instant did he doubt that the killer wouldn't carry out his threat. Although Ryan had known Marla but a few hours, her safety became more precious than his own life. He had a single chance. If he failed, there was only the meeting with the sighing death left.

He rang Volk's bell, received no answer, and tried the door. It was locked. He vaulted over the porch railing, ran around to the side of the house and without hesitation smashed a window. He crawled into the dining room, turned on his flash and headed toward the second floor. He shivered as he walked into the room in which the sighing death had reached out and almost got him in its neck-breaking embrace. Volk's safe reflected in the light of his flash and he knelt before it. But Ryan was no safeblower, and the door was locked. He considered his next move, basing it mainly on the few minutes of time he had left.

There was a soft thud downstairs. Ryan shut off his flash, crept out of the room and headed for the top of the stairs. Someone was coming up the stairs quietly. Ryan moved back into one of the other rooms. A shadowy, burly form passed before his range of vision, stopped and seemed to be listening for a moment and then went on, to vanish into Volk's study. Ryan held his gun in one hand, his flash in the other. Back against the wall, he edged toward the doorway. A pinpoint of light was centered on the safe combination, and thick fingers were

turning the dial experimentally. Then the tiny light went out, but Ryan could observe the intruder place his ear against the safe door and begin twisting the combination again. Whoever this was, he knew safes and was certainly an expert in opening them, for not four minutes later the door swung wide.

Now the pinpoint of light flashed on again and an eager hand began pawing through the contents of the safe. Fingers closed around a sealed envelope, and the cracksman arose. He began moving toward the door. At that moment Ryan filled the doorway and snapped on his torch.

Red, the gorillalike thug, blinked in the intense ray of light. Then he gave a leap and pulled a gun from his pocket. Ryan doused the flash and flung it away. He dived into the room, threw himself to one side, and when Red's gun opened up, the bullet merely whizzed through the open doorway. But Red was no fool. He backed into a corner and prepared to shoot it out with whoever had trapped him.

Ryan, flat against a farther wall, didn't dare move because Red would be listening and prepared to shoot fast. Red was playing a dangerous game and he knew the consequences. The life of each man depended on his remaining perfectly quiet. Ryan couldn't see where Red was hidden, and he dared not open fire on a sheer guess.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a whistling, sighing sound. Red heard it and gave a gasp of terror.

"Not that!" he shouted. "Not that! Please—"

Then Red's utter fear got the better of his judgment and he made a line for the door. In a flash Ryan was after him. Red sprinted down the steps three at a time. He looked over his shoulder to see if that sighing death was in pursuit. Something that looked like a gigantic cloud came hurtling down at him. Red squealed in alarm and tried to duck. The dark object turned out to be a hundred and eighty pounds of solid body with fists that moved with the speed and force of steam-driven pistons. Red lost his balance as both bodies met. He rolled down the stairs, took a bone-smashing clout along the side of his head, and the pain of it seemed to snap him out of his frenzy of fear. His big hands shot out, secured a grip around a throat and he began squeezing.

Ryan felt all the cords in his neck give way under that great pressure. He could only keep jabbing at Red's midsection and inflict all the damage he could, just as fast as possible. Things were beginning to spin, and still those clawlike fingers tightened deeper into his flesh. He brought up his elbow and elicited a grunt of pain as it clipped Red on the jaw. Ryan tried that again and the clutching hands around his throat relaxed slightly. He sucked in a quick breath of air to relieve his agonized lungs, summoned all his strength and literally jerked himself out of that grim embrace.

Ryan scrambled to his feet. Red got up, crouched like a beast ready to attack. They were only dark blobs of shadow in the darkness. Red didn't know whom he fought, but it only served to make him that much more desperate. He started a swing from near the floor and threw his whole body into the punch. It whizzed through nothing but air, for Ryan had leaped agilely aside. Before Red could turn around, he felt a hard jolt across the back of his

neck. It sent him to his knees, half stunned, but one outstretched hand encountered the gun he had dropped in falling down the steps.

Red gave a savage shout of exultation, brought the gun up and fired. Ryan groaned as the slug burned across his scalp, but he retained his wits. Before Red could fire again, he hurled himself upon the man. Red went down, vainly trying to bring the gun into play once more. Ryan pinned the gun hand to the floor, wriggled up over Red's form and knelt on the wrist. Then he plastered two swift punches to the face. Red went limp. Ryan arose, picked up the gun out of Red's unresisting hand and backed up.

"Get up," he growled. "Make a move toward that door and I'll burn you down. You're done, Red."

"Ryan!" Red gasped. "But that . . . that noise. You didn't make it!" He laughed wildly. "You're done, too. You'll never get out of here alive. He'll kill both of us. We haven't got a chance.

As he talked, Red edged toward the stairway. Suddenly he took a daring chance and bolted up the steps. Ryan went after him. He could have shot the man down, but he wanted Red alive. A dead witness can't testify. Red reached the top of the stairs, picked up a chair and hurled it down at Ryan. The detective threw himself flat and the missile hurtled over his head. Red darted into one of the rooms and slammed the door. He turned the key in the lock and shouted derisively. Ryan reached the door, put the muzzle of his gun against the lock and fired three times.

He heard the sound of breaking glass inside the door and then a wild scream. Half a second later the house was jarred by a thud. Ryan raced down the steps again. He bolted out the front door, ran around to the back of the house and saw Red. The thug had taken his last desperate chance. To evade arrest he had jumped through a window, thinking that soft lawn would break his fall. Red didn't know that the window was directly above a concrete driveway and he had landed headfirst.

CHAPTER VII.

THE END OF A KILLER.

Ryan drew his police whistle from his pocket, blew a few short blasts on it and then headed for the street. A glance at his watch told him he had twenty-five minutes to negotiate the traffic across town to Pier 70. He gave cryptic orders to a patrolman who responded to the whistle, jumped into his car and used the siren. Traffic parted for him and the speedometer hand indicated his pace at nearly fifty, but to Ryan it seemed that he was crawling.

He reached the pier, turned off the siren before it could be heard at the warehouse, and braked the car to a stop. He got out and began running.

He sensed that the hide-out of the killer would be in one of the abandoned warehouses, and he was right. The huge building loomed up at the end of the pier. Ryan slowed up, stepped close to the door and pushed it open. He entered in complete darkness, advanced several steps and then felt a gun drill against the back of his neck.

A low, harsh voice issued commands. "You are wiser than I thought, Ryan. Walk straight ahead. There are no obstructions, for this warehouse is quite empty. In a moment I shall turn on a flash-

light. You will walk over to a pillar that stands in the center of the floor, set your back against it and clasp your hands behind the pole. Is that clear?"

"I understand," Ryan said.

The killer extracted Ryan's gun and flash, searched all his pockets to be sure there was no hidden weapon and then urged him forward. He turned on a flashlight as he had promised, and Ryan saw the pillar in the middle of the floor. He backed up against it, put his hands around it and made no move while he was lashed to the post.

The killer chuckled softly and moved away a few paces. You're a fool, Ryan. Certainly, I have the girl here because I knew she was the one method of forcing you to meet me—alone. Of them all, you are the only man who wasn't frightened to death by my clever method of murder. You evidently don't believe in ghosts, lieutenant. However—you will soon know whether or not I have what I've been fighting for. I found one of those maps in your pocket. You tricked Doyle into believing it was stolen, but I knew better. Except for Doyle, you and I were alone in that museum. You fooled me neatly with that statue. I was sure I had finished you that time."

"And the girl?" Ryan asked. "She'll die, too? But do you believe for one moment that I didn't realize this? You have one map—the one I found concealed in McCray's urn. But there was another. Volk had it. Tonight your double-crossing red-headed henchman tried to get it. He opened Volk's safe, but I happened to be there. That map, with a letter indicating just who you are, is on the way to police headquarters right now. Red was in the museum, too, and he saw me play that trick. He got the map and wanted to destroy the only other one in existence, but I stopped him."

"You're lying!" the unknown killer half shrieked. "Anyway, it won't make any difference. I'll be on the next plane south. Before they even begin looking for me, I'll be halfway to the Argentines and the treasure that waits for me there. It's all mine now. All of it, understand?"

Ryan spoke very calmly. "Let's get this straight. You were a member of the expedition that discovered this hidden city. You and the guide also found a cache of gold and

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priceless gems. You murdered the guide so he'd never talk, but he had taken one of the ceremonial knives from the cache and it was found on the altar where he met death by your whip. You hired trusted agents to begin stripping the city of its valuables, but they were hard to locate. I had a wire from the Argentine authorities a few minutes ago to the effect that they had checked up at my request and arrested your men and taken the loot accumulated from the hidden city. So long as those maps existed, the expedition might go back, and you didn't want that. You tried scaring the members away by sending them carved miniatures of themselves, like one which the murdered guide carried. Then you resorted to murder and hired a cracksman to rob the safes of your victims. But Red never found any of the maps, because you already had them. You knew the combinations of those safes from watching their owners open them. Red only supplied a background so no one would suspect you."

The killer growled an oath. A match scraped and a lantern was lit. Its ray revealed his identity, but Ryan showed no surprise. Volk, the slender, narrow-faced member of the expedition had near-madness shining in his eyes. He stepped close to Ryan and spat in his face. Then he rushed into a small office across the big expanse of the warehouse. When he emerged, he dragged Marla with him. Her wrists were tied behind her back, and a gag was thrust into her mouth.

Volk drew back his lips in a snarl. He opened his shirt, reached under it and began unrolling a long, round black object that resembled a huge serpent. When it was fully exposed, it proved to be a thick leather whip. He manipulated his wrist a fraction of an inch and the whip lanced out, flicking at Ryan's cheek.

"Yes," Volk said, "this is the sighing death. I learned how to handle one of these Gaucho whips years ago —when I lived in the Argentine. Remember that miniature of myself which you placed on the table in my home? It vanished into thin air—by means of my little whip. I can practically remove a man's head with my playmate, Ryan. Breaking their necks is very simple."

"So are you," Ryan was smiling tightly. "You terrorized Gates with that miniature of himself. Gates believed he was going to die. He believed in all those ancient superstitions. So Gates killed himself. Then you, outside the window, used your whip, not knowing he was dead. You tried to murder a dead man, Volk. Then Weaver appeared. He was afraid, too, and he bolted to the second floor, thinking he was safer there. You lured him to the window somehow and curled your whip around his neck. But Weaver's glasses fell off and landed in the flowerbed below. You didn't know that because you were on the roof."

Volk sneered, and flicked the whip again. Marla stood about fifteen feet away from him, her eyes riveted on the curling, dancing weapon. Volk spread his legs apart, drew the whip back and leered at Ryan.

"I shall permit you to see just how I can handle my whip. Then you will know what will happen to you. The girl first."

"Wait!" Ryan shouted. "I'll tell you how I knew you were faking. Those nose-glasses of yours. They fall off your nose every time you move fast, but although you swore you fainted in your room, the glasses stayed on your nose. Although you claimed to have been nearly killed

by the sighing death, the glasses stayed put. You merely inflicted a few welts around your neck, Volk, and hoped I'd take the bait."

Volk manipulated his wrist and the whip curled back, lifted high above his head and dropped into position for a quick lashing movement forward.

"What do I care whether you believed me or not?" he shrilled. "The girl dies—now!"

Volk suddenly gaped for the man he had tied so firmly to the pillar was walking directly toward him and throwing his bonds onto the floor. Volk changed his position, faced Ryan and jerked his arm forward. The whip made a complete circle through the air and gave off a wailing, sighing sound so familiar to Ryan's ears. Then it came down to wrap around his neck.

But Ryan's arm shot out to intercept it. The whip curled around his sleeve and ended its encirclement with a sharp crack. Still Ryan moved forward. His right arm didn't fall limp and bloody. Instead, the fingers closed around the whip and gave it a savage jerk. Volk, stunned by this seemingly unnatural result of his efforts, was yanked forward and off his feet. The leather thong about his wrist made him a virtual prisoner. Ryan dragged him closer, bent down and picked him up. He held the man at arm's length, drew back his fist and smashed it full into Volk's terror-stricken face. The killer bounced back, fell heavily and was still.

Ryan rushed over to Marla. When that whip lashed out, her knees had buckled. Ryan carried her into the small office and turned on the lights. She opened her eyes and grinned at him.

"It's still me," he said. "Look!"

Ryan pulled up his coat sleeve. Wrapped around his arm were several layers of metal which he had taken from the bullet-proofed vest.

"I came prepared. Volk tied me up, but the rope went around this metal sleeve and when he went after you, I just slipped my arm out of this metal jacket, replaced the guard before he returned and was ready when he started that whip in my direction. I knew it was a whip, because I saw the marks of it in a sand-pile near the spot where McCray was murdered. I checked up and found that Volk was the only suspect who had lived in the Argentine and would know how to handle one of these babies. He tried to throw off suspicion by fake attacks on himself. He knocked me silly in his own house, robbed his own safe and pretended the sighing death had almost killed him. But he double-crossed Red, and Red was double-crossing him. Volk made his most serious mistake there."

Marla let Ryan's big arms envelope her, and she shivered. He patted her shoulders tenderly.

"Let's get out of here. Volk confessed the whole business in front of both of us. He's on his way to prison. That whip of his made a terrific crack—the crack of doom, I named it. But you know, Marla, they say the electric chair makes a crack too. Volk will find out about that."

They walked toward Vogt, who was still unconscious. Suddenly Ryan made a grab at his trousers and blushed.

"Say, Marla, would you hand me that rope I threw away? I used my belt to whirl through the air and scare Red. It wasn't a very good imitation of the sound, but he fell for it. Now my trousers won't stay up."

In a haunted theater Norgil the magician finds

TOO MANY GHOSTS

by MAXWELL GRANT

CHAPTER I.

THE GHOST WALKS.

The Ghost had finished its sepulchral speech. It was moving from the stage with stately stride, and the audience was glad. Not that it was a real ghost; it was simply an actor playing the part of Hamlet's Father. But this audience did not care for spooks in any form, real or otherwise.

Too many strange things had happened recently, in the Sherbrook Opera House. People claimed the place was haunted, and the audience didn't like to be reminded of it.

From a box seat, Norgil, the magician, watched the first act come to its close. Marcus Pendleton, playing the rôle of Hamlet, was rushing his lines, as though he had the jitters; the other actors were doing the same. From below stage, the Ghost was inserting its repeated admonition: "Swear!" as a reminder that it was still around.

With each repetition of that muffled tone, a quiver buzzed through the audience. Not much of a quiver, for it wasn't much of an audience. There was a sizable sigh, however, when the curtain fell, and lights returned. The audience was really relieved to find a breathing spell.

Norgil turned to Martin Kyne, who sat beside him. Kyne was the owner of the Paragon Theater, where Norgil's show was to open in a few days. He was a broad-faced, beaming fellow, whose smile looked as if it had been painted on his lips; but Norgil could see a reason behind Kyne's present smirk.

Kyne was counting noses; noting that business was very bad at the Opera House. Naturally, as owner of a rival theater, Kyne was pleased.

"A great actor," observed Norgil, glancing at his program. "Too bad he's become a has-been."

"A has-been?" queried Kyne. "You're giving Pendleton too much credit, Norgill. He's a never-was."

"I don't mean Pendleton." Norgil pointed to the program. "I was speaking of Freeland Dubray, who's playing the Ghost. One of the best character actors the stage ever knew."

Kyne nodded. He let his false smile dwindle, as he muttered regrets that so good an actor as Dubray had gone so far down the ladder. Then, Norgil, having shifted the subject neatly, supplied a suave smile of his own.

"Speaking of ghosts," remarked the magician, "this opera house is supposed to have a real one that shows up right along. I came here to see the ghost. But where is it?"

Kyne showed an expression of reluctance, as though it wasn't his business to know too much about matters in a rival theater. He pondered a few moments; then spoke in a tone indicating that he was repeating mere hearsay.

"It started about three weeks ago," he said, "when the bat flew over the audience."

The great weight flattened Pendleton to the stage.

"A real bat?"

"A big one." Kyne was warming to his subject. "Too big, people said, to be ordinary. Anyway, the rumor got around that it was a vampire bat. It scared away most of the lady customers, so Ray Laddimer, who owns this fire trap, switched to a burlesque policy.

"One week of that was enough. The trouble was with the actors, not the audience. The straight man swore he met up with a living skeleton in his dressing room; the soubrette saw snakes climbing the scenery. So Laddimer went back to repertoire. He booked a revival of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' and—"

The rising curtain interrupted. Impatiently, Norgil watched the second act, which was even more abbreviated than the first. It lacked the restraining influence of Dubray, who did not appear in any scene.

During the next intermission, Kyne told Norgil what had happened to the "Uncle Tom" show. A chunk of fake ice had gone through a trapdoor while Eliza was crossing it. The bloodhounds had been frightened by something offstage, and had refused to play their part. On the last night, there had been a near-panic, when the bat flew again, and a great, luminous beast, the size of a wolf, galloped across the stage.

Wolves, like bats, could be identified with vampires, and Norgil was interested when Kyne stated that some witnesses claimed the foam was ectoplasm, a strange, ethereal substance identified with spirit séances.

The third act was on. Pendleton had lost his nervousness, and was rendering a good portrayal of Hamlet. The Ghost appeared near the end of the act, but its part was silent; hence it lacked the dramatic touch of Dubray's sepulchral voice. Supposedly seen by Hamlet's eyes alone, the ghost drifted from the stage. When the act ended, unmarred by any jarring incidents, there was real applause from the audience.

Pendleton stepped forward to take a bow. He was a conceited chap; from his manner, it would seem that Shapespeare, endowed with vision of the future, had written the part of Hamlet especially for Marcus Pendleton.

His chest swelled, Pendleton took more bows, in a hammy style that Norgil considered comical. Perhaps some of the audience thought the same, and were ribbing him by keeping up the handclaps. But Pendleton seemed oblivious to such a circumstance; he was smiling, bowing, when, in a twinkling, comedy turned to tragedy.

A roaring sound came from high above the actor's head; only Norgil, familiar with the stage, recognized what it could mean. Pendleton didn't hear it; he was centered on the applause. Nor could he see the canvas avalanche, as it plummeted downward, from the proscenium arch. Norgil's shout came too late.

The huge roller of a heavy curtain struck Pendleton just above the neck, as he was dipping his head for another bow. The great weight flattened him; as the roller struck the stage, with the smash of a falling tree, it brought the canvas with it.

Marcus Pendleton was buried under a painted tent, with a wooden batten tilted across it like a fallen pole. There wasn't a stir from the pile of canvas as the horrified audience watched it. As actors dashed on from the wings, some one had sense enough to lower the asbestos front curtain, cutting off sight of the stage.

Most persons in the audience were wondering how seriously Pendleton had been injured; but not Norgil. He knew the dangers of the theater too well. With Kyne, Norgil had left the box, and was on his way back stage, to offer what testimony he could regarding the sudden death of Marcus Pendleton!

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN BELOW.

Chaos ruled backstage when Norgil arrived there. Other actors were dragging away the fallen curtain to disclose Pendleton's body. They made a bizarre group in their Shakespearian costumes; among them were the two grave-diggers, who were to appear in the churchyard scene.

One was holding the skull of Poor Yorick, which was turned, by chance, toward Pendleton. Dead Yorick was grinning, in infinite jest, at the Hamlet whose days of soliloquy were ended. Yorick still had a skull, but Hamlet hadn't. Pendleton's head had been crushed by the curtain roller.

The stage crew of the opera house were crowding in upon the actors. There were only a few stage hands; because of bad business, the theater was undermanned, as an economy measure. Hoarsely, the stage hands

were trying to blame everyone but themselves for the curtain accident.

They pointed to the wrinkled curtain; they claimed it was a "drop" that hadn't been used for months. Years would have been a better term, considering that the scene showed hansom cabs, bicycles, and horse cars, all belonging to the Nineties.

Looking about, Norgil saw a shirt-sleeved man in the offing; a brawny fellow, with grizzled hair, who seemed to have some authority, though he was not using it. Norgil stepped over and introduced himself. The fellow thrust out a hairy paw.

"I'm Bill Gorner," he said. "Watchman, here. I belong on the stage door, only half the time they're chasing me on errands. I was on the door, though, when this mess happened."

"Did anybody go out your way?" inquired Norgil.

"Nobody," Gorner said. Then, his bluff face suddenly worried: "When I say nobody, I ain't allowing for no ghosts."

Evidently, the theory that the opera house was haunted had spread among the hired help, which wasn't surprising, considering the occurrences of the past three weeks. Norgil wasn't prepared to debate the subject with Gorner, a man who had been close to the situation. Mention of ghosts made him think of Hamlet's father. Approaching the members of the cast, Norgil glanced about, then inquired:

"Where is Freeland Dubray?"

The Ghost was missing. His absence did more than excite the actors; it aroused the attention of two policemen, who had just reached the scene of tragedy. Learning that Dubray was a member of the cast, the officers started a hunt for him.

Dubray wasn't on the stage, nor in any of the dressing rooms. One officer found an obscure stairway, leading up to the fly galleries, and hurried in that direction. His companion, not to be outdone, went down another stairs, to investigate the cellar.

Norgil was about to follow when he saw a man with a long, hatchet-jawed face arriving backstage. The newcomer was Ray Laddimer, manager of the opera house. As Norgil had expected, Laddimer promptly pitched into Kyne, blaming the rival theater owner for the trouble.

"This looks like your work, Kyne!" roared Laddimer. "You're getting bolder, aren't you? You couldn't be content with making trouble here; you had to come in person, to see how your schemes were making out."

Laddimer was shoving his hatchet-jaw closer with every sentence. Kyne suddenly decided that the sharp edge wouldn't skin his knuckles. He jabbed his fist at the wagging target, and jolted Laddimer considerably. The cops being absent, Norgil sprang between the fighters, thrusting them apart. Actors and stage hands grabbed them.

Timely in its interruption, a muffled voice sounded from beneath the stairs. It was the cop who had gone down cellar. He had found something, and was shouting for others to come. Accompanied by Gorner, Norgil reached the cellar. Magician and watchman found the officer stooped above an unconscious man who lay amid a pile of boxes.

The victim was Dubray, the actor who played the Ghost. There was no mistaking the high-bridged nose, and strong chin that marked the profile of the former matinee idol. Dubray's face was saggy, heavy-jowled; but its pallor came from loss of blood. His thin hair was clotted;

a streak of crimson ran across his forehead, down by his right ear.

Fortunately, the cut wasn't deep. A box-edge had caused it, when Dubray spilled against the stack. It took only a few minutes to revive the actor; but when Dubray opened his eyes, he winced, and clapped his left hand to his right shoulder. Then, with a heroic effort he tried to rise.

Norgil restrained him. Other faces formed a circle, and Dubray stared at the arrivals. When he spoke, his voice lacked its sepulchral tone; still, it was dramatic.

"You must let me go!" He was viewing the surrounding faces, as if he took them for creatures in a dream. "I *must* go! I have a part to play. I am the Ghost of Hamlet's Father. I must stalk, a silent specter, within the portals of Castle Elsinore!"

They were helping Dubray to his feet. One arm hanging limp, he was pushing with the other, trying to reach the stairway. He pushed Gorner aside, but found his path blocked by Norgil. Gesturing angrily, Dubray paused when Norgil questioned:

"When were you last on the stage, Dubray?"

"In the first act," replied Dubray, slowly, as he stroked his head, gingerly. "I spoke upon the ramparts of the castle; then"—he gave a sweeping, one-armed gesture—"I declared myself from here, within the tomb. After that—"

"After that?"

"Something happened." Shrinking, Dubray stared about, his expression quite bewildered. "It happened here. Something struck me, in the darkness. Something"—his pursed lips tightened—"that could hardly have been human.

"But it couldn't have happened very long ago." Relieved, Dubray gave a smile. "A few minutes, I suppose, more or less. It isn't time for the third act, yet. I can afford to rest awhile."

Seating himself upon an overturned box, Dubray fished in his pocket for a cigarette. Norgil supplied a light; the flame of the light merely accentuated the pallor of the actor's face. Then, as he again rubbed his injured shoulder, Dubray noted that he was in ordinary clothes.

"How odd," he remarked. "What can have happened to my costume? I was wearing my ghostly regalia when I came down here. Look about for it, will you, old chap? It should be here, unless"—his tone was indignant, as he stared at the others present—"unless this is some prank—"

It wasn't any prank. The horror that showed on half a dozen faces told Dubray that no one had a jest in mind; but he could not seem to grasp the reason for the hush that had occurred. Dubray's own statements were the cause.

Mystery stalked hand in hand with tragedy. By Dubray's testimony, he had not been on the stage since the first act. Some other Ghost—perhaps a real one—had been the silent promenader during the fatal third act, which had ended with the death of Marcus Pendleton!

CHAPTER III.

FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY.

When they told Dubray that the third act was over, and that Pendleton had been killed by a falling curtain, he actually laughed. The hoax had gone too far, Dubray declared. He didn't care if he had a dislocated shoulder; all he wanted was his cos-

tume, and he would play his part through.

Helped upstairs, Dubray was smiling, ready to forgive the jokers. But when he saw Pendleton's maimed figure and recognized the stage set, Dubray went rigid. His dramatic manner ended as he gasped:

"It's true! All that you told me!"

Searchers found the ghost costume, stuffed on a shelf in the closet of Dubray's dressing room. The bewildered actor could not imagine how it had gotten there. Turned over to a physician, Dubray was taken to his hotel. The other actors formed a huddled, whispering group, wondering what new mystery would confront them.

The cop from the fly gallery returned, bringing a piece of broken rope. It belonged to the curtain that had fallen, and it was badly frayed. Whether it had been hacked with a knife or snapped of its own accord was an open question. The cop had found no other clues in the topmost fly gallery.

Looking up to the height where the gallery formed a thin, weblike bridge of steel, Norgil let his eyes rove to the stairs. The officer had gone up and down without very much noise; another person could have done the same.

"Anyone could have cut that rope," declared Norgil. And then, grimly, he added: "That is, anyone except Pendleton. But we have no proof that the rope was cut. Rather than investigate above, I think that we should look below."

"Just why?" challenged Laddimer. "The curtain came from above, didn't it?"

"We found Dubray below," returned Norgil, "and he ran into somebody down there. Dubray couldn't have dislocated his shoulder by simply pushing over a stack of empty boxes."

Laddimer was inclined to argue further; but a stout man restrained him. Noting the pudgy face of the portly newcomer, Norgil remembered it. Going downstairs with Kyne, he asked who the fat follow was.

Kyne named the man as Andrew Wardlon, a local real-estate promoter. He chuckled over the fact that Wardlon had appeared backstage.

"That's why Laddimer was late getting here," assured Kyne. "He must have been in his office, trying to make a sale to Wardlon. I've had an idea that Kyne is trying to get rid of this old bandbox that he calls an opera house. If he is, he'd better hurry up, or he'll have to give it away."

The officers, by this time, were quite willing to accept any suggestions that Norgil offered, for his manner indicated that he had a plan in mind. His first suggestion was so obvious that everyone had overlooked it; Norgil told them to search the cellar for the "ghost" that had overpowered Dubray.

After about ten minutes, that took care of every open cranny, the officers wound up in front of a locked door that proved to be the property room. Norgil asked who had the keys; Gorner tried a dozen that were on his ring, then shook his head. None of the watchmen's keys seemed to fit.

The prop room, it seemed, was filled with discarded junk that hadn't been used for years—relics from the days when real opera companies had come to the town of Sherbrook. Laddimer made a trip to his office, came back with some old keys, one of which unlocked the door.

Norgil smiled as the officers poked flashlights into the prop room and advanced with drawn guns. It had taken Laddimer quite a while to find the keys, and Norgil could have ended the tense wait, minutes ago. The door was of wood, quite stoutly built; but its hinges were of a simple pin type, easily removable. However, it had been better to wait, and open the door in the conventional manner.

The musty room was filled with trunks and crates. Finding a light switch. Gorner pressed it. The officers put away their flashlights, and the watchman helped them search the room. They pried among crates, and opened some of the larger chests and trunks. But they found nothing except odds and ends of theatrical equipment, mostly wrapped in newspapers, and old pieces of frayed velvet curtains.

The hunt ended, Gorner turned out the light. He pulled a hook that held the door open, so that it could swing shut on its spring. The door had an automatic lock; Gorner tested the knob to make sure that it was tightly shut. After that, the disappointed ghost hunters went up to the stage.

Pendleton's death was a case for the coroner, and the consensus was that it would be declared an accident. So many odd things had happened around the jinxed opera house that the chance fall of the wrong curtain would have been trivial, if someone had not happened to be under it.

The stage hands remained after others had gone to catalogue the spooky occurrences of the past three weeks. But there was not a thing, they admitted, that could have been more tangible than chance, coupled with imagination. They believed that the opera house was haunted, but in the same breath they argued that no one could arrest a ghost.

Slipping away from Kyne, who was drinking in the details that the stage hands gave, Norgil went through the empty theater and reached Laddimer's office. Outside the door, he could not help but catch a conversation within. Laddimer was talking to Wardlon; and Kyne was correct about the real-estate deal.

"Thirty thousand is an attractive offer," Laddimer was saying. "To be frank, Wardlon, it's a trifle better than our own appraisal of the property. How long can you keep it open?"

"Until the end of your season," replied Wardlon. "The spring would be a good time for the wreckers to demolish the building. So go right ahead with your schedule."

"After tonight?" queried Laddimer. "It's likely to be impossible. You haven't an idea, Wardlon, how a hoodoo can hurt a theater. There isn't a show in the country that would play this opera house."

It was just the moment for Norgil to knock. His was the knock of opportunity, but from the startled noises that came to his ears, it seemed that Laddimer and Wardlon took him to be the missing ghost, calling in person.

There was a clatter as Laddimer yanked the door wide. The hatchet-jawed man looked scared, as did pudgy-faced Wardlon, who had retreated to a far corner of the office. Norgil gave them both a suave smile.

"I'm not the ghost," he told Laddimer, "but I've come to talk about him. I'd like to end that jinx, Laddimer."

"But how?" queried Laddimer.

"By bringing my show in here tomorrow," replied Norgil promptly.

"You know, Laddimer"—the coming thought made the magician chuckle—"I've been making a feature of my spook show, with fake ghosts hovering all over the stage. It would be quite a novelty to have a real one in the act."

"But you're to open at the Paragon on Friday—"

"And this," interposed Norgil, "is only Wednesday. I propose to settle the ghost question, during a very limited engagement. You can book my show on the briefest of terms. For one night only!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEATH THAT MISSED.

Never before had the natives of Sherbrook awakened to such a sensation as the one that greeted them in the morning. Along with the front-page story of the Pendleton tragedy, the newspapers carried big headlines stating that Norgil, the magician, intended to challenge the killer ghost.

Big placards, fresh from pounding presses, glared from store windows and telegraph poles. Boys were patrolling the streets, stuffing handbills into doors, and giving them to passers-by. All this was Laddimer's work, but the owner of the opera house had simply followed a suggestion made by Norgil:

Magician Challenges Ghost!

The thing was news, of a very big sort. Evidently Norgil did not agree with the coroner's verdict that Pendleton's death had come through misadventure. But Norgil wasn't locking horns with the law; for everybody agreed that the acts of ghosts were outside the jurisdiction of the county authorities.

At nine o'clock the sale of tickets began. The opera house was sold out by noon. The place was no longer under taboo by the public at large. Norgil's boldness marked him as a ghost tamer, and even the most superstitious persons were willing to be part of an audience when the magician appeared upon the stage.

Should the ghost have a grudge toward any one, it would be Norgil; in fact, the handbills stated as much. But Norgil was prepared to take the risk.

All the rumors of the past three weeks sprang to life. The ghost was blamed for many things prior to its attack on Dubray and its murder of Pendleton. Norgil was not criticized for capitalizing on the situation; he had spiked that possibility.

Every cent of the night's proceeds, the handbills proclaimed, would go to the benefit of the Shakespearian troupe, which was stranded because of Pendleton's death and the injuries to Dubray, the only other member of the cast who knew the rôle of Hamlet.

The one objector was Martin Kyne. The owner of the Paragon Theater wanted Norgil to stay out of the rival opera house; he expressed his reasons vociferously, late that afternoon.

"I won't allow it!" stormed Kyne. "You're under contract, Norgil, to play *my* theater; not Laddimer's."

"Beginning tomorrow," demanded Norgil. "Nothing in the contract prevents me from appearing elsewhere in Sherbrook. I won't be doing my regular magic act; just a special spook show."

"But this will lift the hoodoo from the opera house. It will pull Laddimer out of the red—"

Kyne caught himself at Norgil's suave chuckle. The broad-faced man regained his painted smile, but it looked sickly. Kyne saw the inference; that he had taken part in

the ghost business. Earnestly, he disavowed any connection with things mysterious at the opera house.

"Go right ahead, Norgil," insisted Kyne. "Help Laddimer; he really needs it. You'll get plenty of publicity, and I'll make extra profit when you pack the Paragon next week."

After an early dinner, Norgil went to the opera house, accompanied by his leading lady, Miriam Laymond. The doors hadn't opened, so they went in by the stage entrance, where they found Gorner expecting them. Though his face showed relief, the grizzled watchman betrayed anxiety in his tone.

"Being all alone here," Gorner declared, "I can't watch everywhere. Anybody could come backstage through the house. After I finished my inspection, I heard noises."

"From the stage?" inquired Norgil.

"I don't know," admitted Gorner. "The sounds were too creepy to locate. I figured I'd better stay here until you showed up. But it's gone quiet, lately."

"We'll have a look around."

By the dim light of the stage, Norgil guided Miriam to a dressing room and turned on the light. They were on the far side of the stage; Norgil told the girl to listen for anything unusual. Coming back across the stage, Norgil took the stairway to the cellar.

He wanted to have a look inside the property room. The police had searched it, and found no one hiding, but Norgil could foresee other discoveries. He was thinking of vampire bats, werewolves and snakes. Every old opera house had mechanical contrivances and costumes, used in such stage effects. If anywhere, the items should be in the old prop room.

A light greeted Norgil. The door of the prop room was wide, held open by its hook. Not entirely surprised, Norgil examined the lock; found it intact. He tested the pin hinges, by reaching in back of the door. They were loose; easily removable. There was no way to tell how the door had been opened.

His hands dipped in his pockets, Norgil entered the lighted prop room. The place was topsy-turvy. Crates had been ripped open, the contents scattered. Trunk lids were lifted; the interiors half emptied. A pile of frayed curtains attracted Norgil to a deep corner. As he stopped there, he heard a creaky sound behind him.

Wheeling, Norgil saw the door swinging shut, wavering on its hinges. Some one had lifted the hook that held it open; whether the hand was human or ghostly, Norgil could not tell, for the cellar beyond was dark. He sprang for the shutting door, but it stopped with a jarring slam before he could reach it.

There was a *click* from the automatic lock, leaving no way for Norgil to unlock it, even with a key; for the inside of the door had no keyhole.

Whatever the cause that had imprisoned Norgil below stage, its manifestations were slight compared with those that suddenly alarmed Miriam, in the dressing room.

Her door was open; and outside it, Miriam heard the clump of heavy footsteps that began with startling suddenness. The thing seemed incredible, considering that there was no one on this side of the stage. Staring for sight of a human form, Miriam saw none, though the ponderous paces continued.

Slowly, jerkily, the shining hand wrote the words—using white chalk that had been treated with luminous paint.

They had passed the wing, those strides of an invisible marcher, and were continuing across the stage. They had marched halfway, when the girl found her voice, and uttered a resounding scream. Then, relieved by her own shriek, Miriam dashed in pursuit of the footsteps.

She picked the wrong side of a curtain that was lowered across the center of the stage. The pacing was in back of the curtain; valiantly, Miriam sought to overtake the ghost before it reached the other wing. Almost at her goal, she heard the footsteps halt; pouncing past the wing, she drove straight into the clutch of a figure that shot forward.

A man's strong arms suppressed Miriam's struggles; a hand pressed over her lips, to stop her screams. Staring wild-eyed at the face above her, Miriam managed a stifled gasp. Her captor was Norgil!

The magician had escaped from the closed prop room with rapid ease. In examining the open door, he had removed the loose pins from the hinges, and dropped them in his pocket. The hinges had remained in place, firmly enough for the door to swing when the "ghost" released the hook. But Norgil had driven the door loose with his shoulder, and had begun a search for the spook below, when he heard Miriam's shriek.

Hearing Miriam's description of the footsteps, Norgil studied the stage. His keen eyes detected a ruddy glimmer along a line of nail-heads, in the floor. That nail was copper; tracing the course of the footsteps, Norgil saw an old costume, lying beneath a low table. From the strew, he drew a pair of high boots; tested their weight, and nodded.

"The old comedy stunt," recalled Norgil. "So old, I guess they think I've forgotten it. These boots are loaded with iron filings in the soles. Somebody operated a rolling electro-magnet under the stage, to make them walk across."

Miriam recalled that it was dark outside the dressing room; that the boots could have laid there unnoticed. She realized that Norgil had been imprisoned in the prop room, so that the ghost could find time to make the boots strut. Norgil's prompt escape meant that the mischief-maker was still down cellar.

Intent upon trapping the prowler, Norgil started toward the stairs, taking Miriam along. They had to pass a corner where a small brass stand was placed against the wall. Before they could make the turn, they were blinded by a tremendous flash; as vivid as a streak of lightning.

Miriam clapped her hands across her eyes; raising one arm, Norgil encircled the girl with the other. He wheeled her away from the menacing spot, across the open stage, toward the far wing. As they went, Miriam heard a roaring sound that did not strike her as peculiar, considering the lightning flash.

It was the burst of thunder, coming from high above, breaking, clattering into a tremendous peal. It was Norgil, not Miriam, who seemed to take fright at the roar from overhead. Swinging toward the footlights, Norgil dragged Miriam along, not stopping until they stumbled into the trough.

The thunder had become a crash; its smashes were no longer high, but on the level of the stage. There was splintering sounds, as Miriam opened her eyes. Like Norgil, she was blinking, but both saw the danger that they had escaped.

A shower was striking the stage; not a spatter of rain, or hail, but a deluge of cannon balls that cracked the planking as they struck! Death had missed a pair of victims only through the quick thinking of Norgil, the magician!

CHAPTER V.

THE GHOSTLY HAND.

By the time Norgil and Miriam had reached their feet, another person had joined them. The arrival was Gorner, in from the stage door. Lightning and thunder had brought him, and he was furnishing a partial explanation of the man-made storm.

The brass stand by the stairs was a lightning machine, loaded with magnesium powder. The cannon balls belonged with the thunder apparatus, located in the fly galleries, on the far side of the stage. The metal balls were supposed to roll through a trough from the top gal-

lery to the one below; but usually, they stopped there.

"They're used in 'Rip Van Winkle,' of course," explained Gorner, "and the stage crew figured they might be needed for the 'Hamlet' show. That's why they were set up, and ready; but I can't figure how they happened to go off."

Norgil examined the brass stand. It had a lever, which could have been tugged from the side toward the stairway. Crossing the stage, the magician looked up to the thunder trough. Turning his gaze downward, Norgil saw a coil of rope.

"Somebody yanked it clear out," declared Gorner, in a troubled tone. "That's why those cannon balls rode right through. But what gets me" —his lips had a nervous twitch— "is how both things could have happened. It would take a ghost to hop from one side of the stage to the other"—he snapped his fingers— "just like that."

"He may have started from the other side," decided Norgil, "but he wound up here. Haul up that curtain, Gorner, and let's have a look at the full stage."

Gorner hauled the curtain. Norgil kept peering about to make sure that no one, not even a ghost, could manage to sneak to the stage door or out through the house. Along the back wall were stacks of scenery; as he approached them, Norgil looked for a spot where Miriam could stay away from trouble.

There was a broad board, about the size of a door, propped against the wall. Satisfied that no one could be lurking in such a narrow space, Norgil told Miriam to take her stand near the board, and look around. Norgil was calling to Gorner for more lights, when Miriam interrupted:

"Over there!"

Turning to see which way Miriam had pointed, Norgil witnessed a most startling scene. Miriam's back was against the broad board; her arm gave an upward fling, as a knife blade flashed beneath her elbow, burying itself in the board, almost to the hilt.

Another knife drove in from nowhere, its blade quivering against the girl's smooth neck. Twisting, Miriam shrieked, as a third knife flashed beside her knee. More blades were coming, as Norgil sprang to aid her; flat against the board, Miriam stared with eyes that seemed hypnotized, as the dirks sprang to life about her.

Her arms, her legs, her neck were literally girded with the weapons, yet none had scored a hit. As a knife-thrower, the ghost was superb, but there was no way to guess when he would quit the byplay, and get down to murderous business.

Fearing that Miriam might be pinned by a blade, Norgil would not have seized her, if the girl hadn't staggered forward of her own accord. She was pointing at an angle as Norgil grabbed her; for the first time she actually saw a blade come whizzing through the air. Norgil hadn't waited for the pointing gesture. In gripping Miriam, he rolled her to the floor.

The arriving knife skimmed Norgil's descending neck by a mere half-inch, and went hilt-deep into the board, striking the spot where Miriam's fast-beating heart had been located only a few moments before!

Gorner had seen the direction of Miriam's pointing finger, just before the knives distracted her attention. The watchman dashed across the stage, swinging a billy that he hauled from his pocket. But Gorner overtook neither ghost nor human prey; his trip was too long

and roundabout. He came to a stop at a sliding metal door, a fireproof barrier that separated the stage from the main portion of the theater.

The door was closed; if the fugitive had gone that way, he could easily have reached a side exit in the darkened house. Gorner came back dejectedly to stare at the knives that bristled from the board. He reached for the central dirk; tugged it loose, before Norgil saw what he was doing.

"You should have waited, Gorner," objected Norgil. "If there were fingerprints on that knife handle, they might have helped us track down a murderer."

"There's still a lot of other knives—"

"They won't do." Norgil was at the board; reaching beneath it, he discovered a secret catch. "Watch what happens."

At pressure of the catch, the knives swung upward on their buried points. The trick board spread its double-ply; slots opened, to receive the knives. Once they were out of sight within the thick board, the slots closed.

"The ghost guessed wrong again," declared Norgil. "He brought this board up from the prop room, earlier, hoping somebody would bump against it, and think that knives were coming from nowhere. It fooled me during the excitement; but not afterward.

"It's an old stunt, used by pretended knife throwers. So old, that the ghost thought I'd never heard of it, like the walking boots. The knife throwers used to fake their tosses, and the popping knifes made it look real. Our friend the ghost stepped up the mechanism in this board; when Miriam pressed it accidentally, the knives came fast. The only real knife was the last one; it was intended for my back, when I grabbed Miriam."

As with the thundering cannon balls, death had been the intended sequel in the knife stunt. But the menace of the ghost was ended, for a while. People were arriving backstage; members of Norgil's company as well as stage hands. The theater doors had opened; the crowds were beginning to enter.

Norgil was in his dressing room when Gorner came with a visitor, Freeland Dubray. The man who had played the Ghost in "Hamlet" lacked his pallor of the night before; but his right shoulder was heavily bandaged, and his arm was in a sling. Patches of adhesive tape covered the gash above his ear.

Dubray was earnestly thanking Norgil for his coming contribution to the stranded troupe when he saw the magician pick up a rubber glove that was absorbing the rays of a strong electric light. When Norgil tested the glove in a darkened corner, it gave off a luminous glow.

"The spirit hand," Norgil chuckled. Then, turning to Gorner, in the doorway: "Don't believe the stage crew, if they claim real spooks are around again. When I'm in black"—he pointed to a catlike costume in the corner of the room—"with this glove on my fist, the audience will take the thing for the hand of a ghost."

It was evident that Norgil considered recent trickery as proof that no real ghost would appear. He was still working with the luminous glove, after Dubray and Gorner left; obligingly, Norgil showed his spirit hand to the next visitors.

They were Laddimer and Kyne; the owners of the rival theaters had declared a truce for the evening,

since both stood to profit by Norgil's coming séance. With Laddimer was Wardlon, and the pudgy real-estate man seemed worried because he had been brought behind scenes to the haunted stage. Norgil noted his nervousness.

"I don't blame you," Norgil told Wardlon. "The people in the audience will feel safe only as long as they're on their own side of the footlights. But I've got to have a committee on the stage, when I give my challenge to the ghost.

"I'd like to come up, Wardlon, to start the rest. You two can come also"—Norgil was speaking casually to Laddimer and Kyne—just to promote some confidence. You'll help out, too, if they get scared when I use the glove. Keep them calmed. I'll appreciate it."

The fact that the ghost was to be a fake one satisfied the listeners. Before leaving, they agreed to Norgil's plan. Alone, the magician tested the glow again, and smiled as he noted its shade of ghostly green.

A ghostly hand would appear tonight; of that, Norgil was quite certain. But the magician's scheme went deeper than the matter of the luminous glove. Thinking in terms of the haunted theater and the death that had struck upon its stage, Norgil was counting upon the appearance of a hand other than his own!

CHAPTER VI.

THE FINGERS WRITE.

Norgil stood upon the lighted stage, in front of a black velvet alcove that his assistants had arranged. Placed in the alcove was a large blackboard, on an easel. It was a device that Norgil had invented, but never used; intended for a usual spook act, the blackboard was perfect for the magician's present show.

Chairs flanked the alcove; a dozen on each side. The chairs were occupied, by daring members of the audience who had played follow the leader when Wardlon, Laddimer, and Kyne had come up the steps to the stage.

They were an assorted lot, those daredevils. A few were brawny fellows, built like truck drivers, who managed to exchange half-hearted grins. Others were debonair youths who had lost much of their nerve. They looked as though they had come on the stage because their girls had dared them.

Those on one side had let Wardlon take the post of honor nearest the alcove. Those on the other had grabbed the other chairs, forcing an old gentleman into the nearest one. Wardlon, his fat face dubious, was staring stiffly at the old man, who sat with his chin in one hand, peering dully through his pince-nez glasses. At times he tilted his head, with its shock of gray hair, and studied the blackboard wonderingly.

Norgil called for a pair of ropes; then asked the committee to tie him to a post, away from the alcove. He rejected Wardlon, who was too stout for so much effort, and also waved back the old man whose long, shaky hands were not the sort that could tie strong knots.

Bound to the post, Norgil turned his face toward the audience, and announced:

"When the ghost appears, you can be sure that it is not myself. I shall call upon the ghost, requesting it to write a message on the boards. The words that the ghostly hand inscribes will reveal the truth of all strange events that have happened on this stage."

Norgil's tone was confident. It

brought an excited buzz throughout the audience. Norgil looked toward the wing near the stage entrance. Gorner had taken over the switchboard; the watchman was nodding, to assure Norgil that the lights would go off and on, exactly as called for.

Norgil ordered lights off.

Blackness blotted the stage. Committee and audience sat tense, wondering what was happening in the gloom. None doubted that Norgil could shake off the ropes, should he choose. The magician had a reputation as an escape artist; such work, to him, was child's play.

Then, as though a hidden force had ripped the darkness, a luminous hand appeared, at a spot which could only be the upper left corner of the unseen blackboard!

The wisdom of Norgil's admonition to his own committeemen was proven. Chairs shuffled on the stage, their occupants anxious to make a dash back for the steps. Calm whispers restrained them; prevented panic.

Slowly, jerkily, the shining hand began to write. It was using white chalk that had been treated with luminous paint, for the inscribed words glowed, like the hand itself. The letters were large, distinguishable at a distance:

The man who can tell the truth of crime is with us. His name is—

The hand had finished two lines, flitting across the board, between them. It was moving leftward again, to commence the third line, which would start with the promised name, when the blackboard gave an upward jolt.

There was a shout from Norgil; with it, the flame of a revolver split the darkness. People heard the thwack of a club, striking against woodwork. Instantly lights appeared; in the burn from the borders and the footlight troughs, a strange fray was revealed.

Two men were struggling in front of the blackboard, which was turned askew. One had a revolver; the other a club. The man with the gun was the old gentleman from the committee; his antagonist was Gorner, the watchman!

Norgil wasn't in the fight. He was clear of the ropes, and at the right side of the blackbard. At the left of the board was the hand; a carved thing of wood, mounted on the board itself. Attached to the hand was a roller cloth; like two that Norgil had already rolled, from his side of the blackboard, to disclose written lines previously inscribed on the surface of the board itself.

The blackboard bore a bullet hole; there was a big dent, where a club had struck. Both men had been after Norgil when they encountered each other in the dark. Each thought he had therewith grabbed the magician.

One man was instantly recognized. He was Gorner, the watchman, swinging his heavy billy. The club grazed the other fighter's head, as it ducked aside; the old man's wig was carried away, as his glasses tilted from his nose. His identity, too, was disclosed. The old man who had cast his years aside was Freeland Dubray!

Committeemen were smothering the fighters. They sprawled Gorner, and yanked his club away. Hands clutched Dubray's gun, thrusting its muzzle toward the owner. Before Norgil could get the weapon from the actor, Dubray pulled the trigger.

Whether by chance or design, the shot found Dubray's chest. Dragged

to a chair, Dubray realized that he had received his death wound. He elevated his chin toward Norgil; his glazing eyes steadied for the moment.

"You win," panted Dubray. "I killed Pendleton. He was"—the man's lips twisted, as he coughed; perhaps their contortion was a grin —"he was a lousy Hamlet."

Gorner, bewildered, was staring at Norgil; his eyes turned toward Miriam, who was coming from the switchboard, which she had taken, when the watchman sneaked from it. Like Dubray, Gorner knew that his part of the game was known; he nodded weakly as Norgil voiced accusations.

"You were the ghost for three weeks, Gorner," disclosed Norgil. "It had to be some one backstage. As the watchman, you were the only one who could cover his own tracks. Your game was never murder; you were simply paid to jinx the opera house.

"These keys of yours"—Norgil jingled a bunch that had fallen from Gorner's pocket—"include one to the prop room. I saw you fumble it last night. That's where you got the old contraptions to work your second-rate ghost stunts."

Gorner started to say something; then hesitated. Norgil spoke it for him.

"Dubray spotted you in the prop room last night," declared the magician, "when he went down to speak from the tomb. He pulled the hook and locked you in; that's why the ghost didn't do any of its usual tricks.

"After he'd finished with his part in the third act, Dubray saw a chance at murder, that he could blame on you. He stowed his costume in his dressing room and sneaked to the fly gallery. He cut the rope, so a curtain would fall squarely on Pendleton. Dubray hated the fellow who had crowded him out of the Hamlet part."

Norgil was ready to reconstruct the whole case further; but Gorner felt that he could help himself by admitting something on his own.

"That's why Dubray let me out!" he blurted. "He wanted me to be the goat. I was fool enough to put the slug on him—"

"And Dubray was smart enough," interposed Norgil, "to make it worse for you, by pretending that he'd been knocked out long before the murder."

Gorner nodded, somewhat blankly. "You thought the curtain fell by

accident," said Norgil. "Dubray fooled you completely. When I arranged to appear here tonight, you felt you had to pull some ghost stuff. You dug up the boots, and the knife board.

"The lightning flash was smart, Gorner. You sprang it, so I wouldn't catch you coming from the cellar. But Dubray was smarter. He'd sneaked in the house and was across the stage. He supplied the thunder and let it go the limit. Already a murderer, he was ready to kill again.

"He chucked the real knife later; the only one he had. It had you baffled, Gorner. You fell for Dubray's pretense that his wrenched shoulder was a dislocation. You see"—Norgil turned to the listeners—"there were *two* ghosts in the game; and two happened to be too many, when I introduced a third."

Norgil's stunt of showing a luminous glove to Dubray and Gorner, then substituting a mechanical hand, was the crux of the whole revelation. Separately, Dubray and Gorner had pounced for Norgil, neither expecting to meet the other, instead.

There was just one more question. Ray Laddimer produced it. Angrily, the owner of the opera house shouted:

"Somebody bribed you to start that jinx, Gorner! You don't have to tell me who it was. I know!"

With a leap, Laddimer reached his old antagonist, Martin Kyne. The manager of the Paragon Theater met the attack. This time, Norgil did not come between them. Instead, he clapped a hand upon the shoulder of a portly man, who was half from his chair, wondering which way to go.

"A better candidate," volunteered Norgil. "Andrew Waldron."

Forgetting their feud, the rival theater man grabbed the real-estate promoter. Waldron blubbered the truth, knowing that Gorner would expose him anyway. He'd wanted to make Laddimer sell the opera house before the word got around that the site was wanted by a big utility company for its office building. Waldron had planned to sell at triple the price he offered Laddimer.

When the crowd had gone, and Norgil was packing his equipment, the magician turned to Miriam with a smile. Whimsically, Norgil summed the story of his successful séance, with the words:

"Too many ghosts!"

"THE RED POOL," a complete novel by Norvell Page, will feature the June issue of MYSTERY, on sale during May. In addition, there will be another Jim Strong novelette by Frank Gruber; a Red Drake yarn, "I Stole a Horse," by W. T. Ballard, and other stories by Mark Harper, Blassingame, and so on. Remember—every issue of Street & Smith's MYSTERY Magazine is packed with unusual stories—the biggest buy you can get for only TEN CENTS!

ANGEL'S WINGS

Angus Saint-Cloud plays with death every second—and likes it!

A "Death Angel" Novelette **by NORVELL W. PAGE**

They were very much alike, the Persian cat and woman with the glowing red hair, sleek and expensive—and savage.

The woman carried the cat in her arms like a smoky-blue muff against the dull-gold of her gown and, even in the lobby of the extravagant

Wardwell Hotel, heads turned to follow the slow, feral languor of her walking.

Angus Saint-Cloud, a gloved hand clamped unobtrusively—but very firmly—on her upper arm, wore a smile of almost vapid pride on his lips. Behind the glitter of his nose glasses his blue eyes were warily alert. He could feel the smooth glide of muscles under his hand, like steel under velvet. These dancers were strong.

"You are being very stubborn, Alicia, my dear," Angus said amiably. "If you would surrender the Purple Emerald I wouldn't have to have you searched—in more intimate detail!"

Alicia didn't speak, and Angus watched her eyes. They were amber and masked under the droop of her kohl-darkened lids. The anger that glowed in their depths was like animal anger, fierce and precariously restrained.

"The emerald isn't in your bag or your cape," he went on, as attentive as if he murmured compliments, "which I made an opportunity to examine. The heels of your slippers are solid, otherwise the kick I administered—and for which I apologize my dear—would have torn them off!"

The lids that covered the amber eyes drooped a merest fraction more, but it was her lips, full and ripely red, that really gave Angus his warning—too late! Those lips moved in a smile. Angus tightened his grip on that strangely muscular arm; his keen gaze flashed ahead. A man as dapperly dressed for the afternoon as was Angus himself was strolling toward them across the lobby, a cane jaunty between his fingers.

"Careful, Alicia," Angus said lightly, "or I shall be forced to administer some slight reprimand, and—"

That was the moment when the attack came, as sudden and savage as jungle death—and it came from the woman herself!

The arm Angus gripped did not stir. It was the woman's right hand that whipped upward, and a cat's squawling scream slashed across the murmurous quiet of the glittering lobby! Angus, whipping about, saw the cat already in the air, flying straight toward his face! The cat's enraged eyes were strained wide, its ears laid back viciously—and teeth and claws were bared to strike with the force of fifteen pounds of rage and sinew into the unprotected flesh of Angus Saint-Cloud's face!

Any other man than the detective must have gone down with the cat clawing his eyes to shreds. As it was, Angus saved himself only by releasing his grip on Alicia's arm and flinging himself sideways in a ducking bound that tumbled his silk hat from his head and sent him sprawling to the deep-carpeted floor on braced hands!

Angus was instantly erect, and the flexed alert way his arms lifted, the indrawn, protected chin told their own story of how he had managed to evade the lightning violence of Alicia's attack. They were the reflexes drilled into nerve and muscle during a skyrocket career in the prize ring which had stopped short of the championship only because his fists had proved too powerful! They had killed an opponent in the ring, and at the same time earned for Angus the name under which, as a detective, he had become a dreaded nemesis of the underworld—the name of the Death Angel!

The smile of the Death Angel was on his lips now as he straightened.

So swift had been his movements that the cat was just landing on the floor; Alicia had taken only one stride.

Alicia took two more quick running steps toward the dapper young man whom Angus had noticed. Her royal blue cape swirling from her shoulders, she flung both arms around the man's neck—and kissed him fiercely on the mouth!

Angus' smile deepened his mouth corners and his eyes sharpened. He watched every movement that Alicia made so as to be sure she didn't pass the emerald to the man. Angus' left hand fell on Alicia's right shoulder, and his touch seemed light, yet suddenly the dancer's arms were ripped loose from their clasp and she went whirling and reeling a good dozen feet away! Her high heels tripped on the deep carpet, and she sat down violently on the floor. Her silken skirts billowed above her knees.

Angus saw that, nodded amiably as he stepped in on the dapper man whose lips were smeared with Alicia's mouth rouge.

"Sorry, old man," Angus murmured, "but it's the innocent bystander who suffers—sometimes!"

His fist, carefully restrained from its full power, crossed neatly to the jaw. The man's silk hat, undisturbed by the violence of the girl's kiss, snapped from his head! He had been knocked out from under it. Angus' quick eyes saw that the man's loosening hands were empty and, before the man had landed solidly on the floor, Angus was striding toward Alicia.

Alicia's eyes were as widely vicious as those of her cat. She was on one knee, rising, and her right hand clawed toward the bodice of her dress. The dress gaped to reveal, among other things, the pearl butt of a small automatic!

Angus blinked, said, "Pardon me!"

He plucked the gun from her hand, kept his grip upon her wrist. With a smooth, powerful movement, he pulled Alicia forward, face down across his bent knees—and began to spank her!

"I warned you!" he said lightly. His lips still smiled, but the light in his eyes was grim. "I have eliminated two more hiding places, Alicia, my dear. The emerald is neither in your bodice, nor in your garters. Nor did you pass it to the young man." His hand rose and fell rhythmically. The flat, solid whack of it sounded clearly across the lobby. Men were starting forward. Women stood in strained, incredulous attitudes. A house detective lurched toward Angus at a stride that was almost a run.

Despite the frantic and muscular writhing of Alicia, Angus' left arm clamped her immovably across his knees, and his right hand continued to rise and fall. He never struck twice in exactly the same place, and through the draped silk of her dress, the outline of her corsets began to show.

Angus sighed. "I'm afraid the emerald isn't in your corsets either," he said. "And yet I'm positive you're the leading light of this new extortion gang. I think, Alicia, that you murdered Raoul Milbanks with your own soft little powerful hands!"

He set Alicia on her feet just as the house detective skated to a halt beside them.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Alicia," Angus said crisply. "You should know better than to kiss men of whom I disapprove!"

The detective's jaw sagged. Behind him, two more of the hotel's

efficient corps of detectives were bending over the man Angus had punched.

Angus smiled at the house dick nearest him. "Sorry to create a disturbance," he said amiably, "but Alicia needed a lesson in discipline. I find that such things are better done on the spot, don't you? No, Alicia, don't attempt to go away or I shall have to reprimand you again!"

Alicia flinched from his words, ripped out an oath that seared like hot iron, but Angus suddenly was not looking at her. A sharp movement on the part of the two detectives beside the prostrate man had caught his eye. They were drawing their guns, pointing them toward Angus!

"Just stand there now," one said grimly to Angus. "If you make a move to escape, so help me God, I'll drill you! And I can shoot!"

Angus smiled incredulously, shook his head. "But I have no reason to escape," he said equably.

The detective's eyes were cold. "A cool one, aren't you?" he rasped. "Do you realize you have just murdered a man?"

CHAPTER II.

THE ANGEL FLIES.

For the moment that it took Angus to glance toward the supine body of the man he had punched, his attention wavered from Alicia—and when he looked back toward the grim face of the accusing detective, the dancer was racing for the side-street exit of the hotel!

Angus uttered a sharp exclamation, wheeled—and the hands of the detectives closed solidly on his shoulders.

"No, you don't, buddy!" the man growled. "You're staying right here until we turn you over to the police! If they want the girl, they can pick her up later!"

Angus' schooled face, his mild smile, showed nothing of the tension that gripped him. He knew now that his suspicions of the dancer were entirely correct, and he had to overtake her at once. There was better than a million dollars at stake, not to mention the murder charge against himself! For there was no doubt that the man he had punched was dead. Angus had seen too many dead men not to recognize a corpse!

But Angus' voice was mild as he spoke to the detective. "I can demonstrate in a few moments that I did not kill this man," he said easily, "though it is true I have punched a few men to death. My particular variety of the death punch causes a broken neck, and is delivered as an uppercut. The chief force is exerted by a supreme co-ordination of the entire body, and the actual muscular force is exerted by the lumbar muscles of the back, by the *abductor* and *biceps femoris*—in the thighs, you know." Angus' manner was didactic, his beaming smile almost professorial. The detectives watched him first with suspicion, then with a growing bewilderment. Some of the guests had crowded nearer, and Angus heard a woman giggle.

Angus nodded gravely, "Now, the blow which laid out this gentleman was a right cross, an entirely different matter. And I know the power which I exert to the last ounce of calculation. If you would permit a demonstration, please—*this is a right cross!*"

His fist snapped out without any preliminary warning at all, and the blow impacted solidly against the

man's jaw. His pomaded hair jarred awry on his head, a twistedly amazed expression crossed his face, and his joints went loose, all in a fraction of a second. But Angus had not stayed to watch him. His fists flashed out twice more, and there was, twice more, a crack of fist meeting flesh.

"Those last two punches," Angus beamed at the guests who stared in stiff postures of fear, "were a left hook and an uppercut, the latter carefully calculated only to stun. You will please call the attention of these gentlemen, when they presently revive, to the fact that they are not dead!'"

Even as he spoke, Angus was in swift motion. A single stride placed him beside the body of the dead man. With an easy co-ordination of trained muscles, he had the corpse across his shoulders—and was running straight at the compact crowd of guests! Outside, in the street, a police siren gave a short yelp ond then strangled itself.

Angus swore under his breath as he slanted across the lobby of the hotel. He had lost a full minute getting away from the detectives and Alicia had made good her escape—Alicia, who was his only clue in an extortion swindle that involved over a million dollars in policy losses for Gold Seal Bonding, which paid Angus a handsome, and quite necessary, retainer. Also, there was the matter of the murder of this man whom he carried across his shoulders!

Angus spotted the manager of the hotel standing in a ludicrously indignant pose beside his office door. Instantly, Angus was leaping toward the man!

"Run, fool!" Angus cried at him. *"Run for your life!"*

The man's mouth opened in a hoarse squawk of fear. He started to run away from the door, then changed his mind and started toward it. Darting after him, Angus threw a quick glance back at the crowd, at the doors of the hotel. Blue-coated police were just pushing into the lobby. The guests were scattering with frantic small cries. In the tea lounge, seen through a high and florid arch, men and women were on their feet in incipient panic.

And on a tea table, elaborately spread near the door, was Alicia's Persian cat. It was eating cake!

That much Angus saw before he reached the door of the manager's office. The man was inside now, trying to close the door. Angus hit hard with his shoulder. The manager spun across the room, slammed against the wall. His head made a hollow thump against the plaster and then his body was crumpling to the floor. Angus shouldered the door shut, locked it. He saw then that there were no windows in the room!

But the dapper detective wasted no time in worrying about that. He had more immediate problems on his mind. He flopped the dead man on his back on the desk, began to run rapidly through his pockets with one hand while, with the other, he unhooked the phone, and dialed a number. The manager remained motionless upon the floor. A fist hammered on the door, and shouts came through thinly. Apparently, the office was soundproofed. That meant the door was solid, would hold against assaults for a while.

Angus stared at the articles he was spilling out upon the surface of the desk from the man's pockets. He glanced at a key, and his eyes blinked happily at the discovery. It bore upon its head the impression

2017—which was the number of Alicia's suite! This, then, was an ally of Alicia!

His phone call clicked through at that moment, and he spoke rapidly into the transmitter. "Saint-Cloud here. Put on the joke who calls himself president. . . . Hello, Miller. Angus here. . . . Calling you because unless I'm lucky I'm going to be arrested for murder in about two minutes. Shut up and listen.

"Working on the Maurice case. Yes, I thought you'd remember. We paid out a half million for an insured gold-and-ivory statue of Isis, which Maurice reported stolen. It wasn't stolen. It was extorted from him. That was my theory, and I'm proving it. Milbanks, another collector of art objects, was murdered two months ago. Both Milbanks and Maurice had been stepping out with a dancer named Alicia Revere. *Shut up and listen.*

"Now, Emil Boggs is stepping out with Alicia. Yes, the same Boggs who insured the Purple Emerald with us for a cool half million!

"The point is this. These extortion artists have hit on a brand-new racket. Most people who resist extortion because they have to part with their own hard-earned cash. These extortionists merely demand the surrender, on pain of death, of some art object which is amply insured—usually by us! The victim surrenders, reports a theft to us, and in the end the insurance company has paid the extortion. Will you *listen,* Miller!

"I recommend that you cancel Boggs' policy as quickly as possible. You can assign as a reason the fact that he is associating with a known criminal, Alicia Revere, the dancer. No, I'm positive that if you act promptly you'll find he still has the emerald. Lord, do I have to explain everything to you? All right, here's how I know that Boggs still has the emerald, but I warn you that you won't understand my deductions, though actually they are elementary.

"In the first place, Alicia's murdered boy friend has two seeds in his pocket. No, not money—seeds. One marihuana and one sunflower seed. Yes, and an aluminum band stamped with the name of an antique Persian king, to wit, Xerxes. Yes, damn it, I'm explaining how I know Boggs has the emerald still. And the crowning piece of evidence is the fact that Alicia Revere's cat is perched on a table in the hotel dining room consuming for tea a portion of *baba au rhum!*

"Now, get busy and cancel that policy!"

Angus slammed up the receiver and listened attentively to the impact of blows on the door. The portal was shivering a little in its frame, but it should hold for another moment or two. It was necessary to know just how Alicia's boy friend had been killed. Angus ripped open the dead man's shirt, and he swore fiercely.

"Rough business, old man," he said, and his sympathy was genuine. "You are undoubtedly a crook, but it's tough to be murdered when you're unconscious. From the nature of that wound, I judge you were murdered by a high-powered low-caliber bullet, probably from a silenced rifle. The bullet would make almost no mark at all on the clothing, as this one has. And the wound would be just a tiny blue puncture. Hemorrhage internal, and slight."

Angus caught up another phone from the desk, one that connected with the switchboard. When he spoke, his voice was querulous and

The gloved hands of Angus clamped about one of the ropes as he shot downward!

frantic, in imitation of the hotel manager.

"Tell those police fools," he said, "to quit pounding on the door! I'll hold them strictly responsible for all damage. Understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Blailey," the switchboard operator gasped.

"Also, tell them that I have the man they want a prisoner at gun point, and that if they will kindly stop hammering until I can unlock the door, I will permit them to enter!"

"Yes, Mr. Blailey!"

Angus snapped the phone back into place, and lifted the dead man into the chair behind the desk, propped him so that his head sagged forward in an attitude that looked purely dejected. Then Angus took the dead man's revolver, and went to the door.

"All right, all right!" he called,

in the same querulous voice. "I'm going to open the door, but for Heaven's sake, remember I'm not the man you're after!"

He was still repeating that when he unlocked the door and twisted the knob. He stood with his back turned three quarters toward the opening, pointing the gun toward the dead man behind the desk. He swung the door wide.

"All right, all right," he said. "Go on and take him. I'm not at all sure this gun is loaded and he's a desperate man!

Two men in police blue bolted through the doorway, eyes on the man behind the desk. The moment they were inside, Angus jumped outside and clapped the door shut, shoved the key into the lock and twisted it off! In an instant, he was bounding toward the side-street exit through which Alicia had fled. He had his speedy roadster parked there. If he could only reach that—

Behind him, he heard a few startled cries, but no sounds of pursuit. He had spotted no other police on hand. He had worked too swiftly for more to reach the scene, but they certainly could not be far away. They—yes, there was already the whine of more sirens!

Angus took the sidewalk in two long jumps, slid behind the wheel of his roadster and jabbed the key at the ignition lock. He was just pressing the starter when a voice spoke, mildly, from the sidewalk.

"Pliss, Mr. Saint-Cloud," it said.

Angus' head whipped that way. He was looking into the bland expressionless face, the opaque eyes of a Chinese boy he had never before seen in his life. The Chinese had a large package of laundry in his hands.

"Pliss, Mr. Saint-Cloud," the Chinese said. "You take your laundry along now allee samee? Two dollals, pliss. It no matter this time you have no tickee."

CHAPTER III.

DEATH FLIES.

Angus Saint-Cloud's smile was as innocent as a guilty child's as he blinked guilelessly at the Chinese, and at the package—ostensibly laundry—in his hands. Behind his nose glasses, his eyes had a quick wary light and he glanced beyond the Chinese, combed the street for danger. No man he could identify as a killer was in sight, certainly no rifleman. There was no pursuit, either, though a man was hesitating just inside the hotel door. A half block ahead, the dying moan of sirens announced that two more police cars had arrived.

Angus reached across to punch open the door. He nodded amiably at the Chinese. "Two dollars, eh?" he asked softly. "Just put the package on the seat, and I'll see if I have any change. You're new at the laundry, aren't you?"

While he spoke, Angus was opening the dashboard compartment of the car. The Chinese leaned over to deposit the package on the seat, and Angus' hands leaped out fiercely. His left hand clamped on the man's collar, yanked him inside, and an instant later he had snapped handcuffs on the man's wrists. The violent forward surge of the car as it whipped from the curb, hurled the Chinese to his knees, slammed the door. The man cowered down. His handcuffed wrists, resting on top of the package, were shaking.

"Just make yourself comfortable on the seat, boy *san*," Angus said. "You're going to be with me for a while. Next time, you deliver a package of *laundry*, be sure that in

rewrapping it you crease the paper in the same places as before. *On the seat!"*

The Chinese fumbled his way to the cushions. His face was impassive, but there was a glisten of fear in his eyes. Angus shot a glance ahead, spotted another police car—and the traffic light had turned red. He coasted toward it, keeping an acute watch on the Chinese, on the street behind. He could not place the Chinese in this case, nor the laundry package. Unless it was part of a plot to kill him!

"Now then, boy *san,"* Angus said gently, "you will open the package for me. Since this is a new laundry, I would like to see what damage you have done to my shirts!"

The Chinese's shoulders cringed; his manacled hands trembled on top the package.

"Did you ever try running in handcuffs?" Angus asked. "A thoroughly awkward and unsatisfactory business. *Open the package!"*

The boy's hands jerked frantically to the task and, seeing the contents of the package, Angus ripped out a low oath and stabbed a glance behind him. Afterward, a slow smile grew on his mouth.

"A real bargain at two dollars," he said softly. "Fancy obtaining a woman's complete wardrobe for that price! But Alicia must be damnably uncomfortable. The day is quite chilly!"

No question that the package contained every item of Alicia's clothing, dull gold dress, blue cape, underwear of silk and lace, even stockings and corsets! And every seam of every garment had been ripped open!

Also, there was a note penciled in crude letters!

Angus caught it up as he braked to a halt at the red light, but his eyes shuttled to the rear-vision mirror.

"A very clever trick, boy *san,"* he said. "Not many people would suspect Alicia of staging a strip-tease act in a laundry truck. I refer to the half-ton truck just behind us, which I see is operated by the Wo Sing Family Wash—whose trademarked paper was used to wrap this package. Yes, they are following us, but quite discreetly."

The Chinese made a small moaning sound, and his small manacled hands knotted between his knees. Angus snatched another glance at the note in his hands, and chuckled. It read:

> If you want to see the girl alive again, go to Broadway and 242 St. Wait until ten o'clock. Otherwise its curtains, see. The clothes is to prove we got her.

As the traffic light blinked green, Angus whipped the roadster around the corner to the left, away from the jumble of police cars before the hotel. He made two right-hand turns then, and drifted up toward the same street on which he had been parked, pulled in beside a fire hydrant and waited for the laundry truck to show.

"The deductive process, boy *san,"* said Angus, "saves one so much time. I knew that Alicia didn't have the emerald, but your crooked friends had to rip open the last seam of Alicia's last garment in order to find out. Now, they shall save me a great deal more difficulty. They will force Alicia to lead them to the emerald. Suppose we just trail along, what?"

Angus turned his smile toward the Chinese, and the smile froze and hardened on his mouth. The boy was hunched forward over the

opened package, and there was a dark stain on the dull gold of Alicia's siken dress—a red stain! It came from a thin trickle that made its sluggish way down behind the Chinese's left ear and angled across his jaw. As Angus stared, another slow red drop shook free to splash down upon the silk. The wound in the back of the boy's head was small, deadly. The silenced rifle had spoken again, and the word it spoke was *Death!*

A chill worked its way up the dapper detective's spine. That silent shot might just as well have been intended for him! But no, they wanted him alive, out of the way; so that if their work with Alicia failed they could use him. The smile on Angus' mouth turned grim and deadly. Ahead of him, the Wo Sing truck was trundling across the street. Angus eased the roadster into gear and swung into its wake!

The chase meandered westward through the city at a leisurely pace and, finally, the truck spun into an alleyway beside the Sovereign Theater. The marquee proclaimed: *"Opening Soon . . . Satyrs in Spring."* Angus shot past the mouth of the alley, glanced keenly into its shadows. The alley ended in a blank wall, and a man from the truck was already moving toward the theater's stage door!

Angus cut the roadster to the curb —and swore. The entire street was a no-parking zone! Ordinarily, Angus would have risked leaving the roadster here, but with the murdered Chinese as a passenger, the danger was too great! He could not afford to be interrupted by the police at this point. One more murder charge— Angus' blue eyes were harassed. He had to solve this thing and solve it quickly! Two murder charges, and a sniper with a silenced rifle, who would be after him the instant the emerald was in his hands!

It was a full three minutes before Angus could find a parking place where the Chinese wasn't apt to be spotted and double back to the theater. He peered into the blind alley —and the truck was already gone! But Angus looked upward and saw that, despite the chill of the late afternoon, the window of the dressing room stood open. He nodded in approval, marched up to the stage door. He pushed it open, stepped casually inside!

There was a man seated in a chair tilted back against the wall. His head snapped about, and he came to his feet lithely. His right hand slid into the pocket of an over-tailored, dapperly creased coat. His white felt hat was jaunty.

"Nobody comes in!" he said harshly.

Angus' smile broadened. "I cannot think that you are the usual guardian of the door, not in that garb," he said. "Did anyone ever tell you that your taste in hats is execrable?"

The man's head jerked up, and amazement stared out of his eyes. "Say!" he sputtered. "Say, what the hell—"

"No, no!" Angus shook his head. "Close your mouth! That way, it will hurt less!"

The lift of the man's head had elevated the jaw to just the right angle. As his teeth snapped shut in anger, Angus' fist caught him neatly on the button. The white hat hit the floor first.

Angus delayed only to lock the outer door and pocket the key. He swung around the corner of the hall-

way, going fast, and his feet scarcely whispered on the iron treads of the stair to the dressing rooms. He checked before a door marked by a large gilt star, pushed open the door abruptly. There was another guard here, shoulders propped against the wall. He clawed for his gun, and Angus kicked the man's left leg from under him. As the man went down, his jaw met Angus' right fist coming up!

Angus closed the door gently. "Sorry to call so informally, Alicia," he said pleasantly, "but in your strip-tease act in the laundry truck, you failed to remove your gun holster. I'd like to see it, please!"

Alicia was twisted about in a stiff attitude of fear before her dressing-table mirror. Her negligee was bright green, made crisp little mounds about her feet. Her scarlet lips were pulled back from small white animal teeth.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come!" she cried. She sprang to her feet, came toward Angus swiftly. The negligee flared. Her knees were bare, and rouged. "These men, they have kidnap me! They have insult me, oh, terribly!"

"But they didn't find the emerald, of course." Angus' smile did not change. "Do you think it was smart to double-cross your gangster friends? I know you took most of the risk in the murder of Milbanks and the robbery of Maurice, doing the gander work for the gang and putting the finger on your boy friends. But you should know that sometimes crooks resent being crooked by other crooks. And you weren't strong enough to go it alone."

Alicia made her amber eyes very large and innocent.

"I do not understand you!" she cried. "I have been kidnap, and—"

"And insulted," Angus agreed. "The holster, please. Where is it? I was pretty well satisfied you didn't have the emerald, even before I saw your cat eating *baba au rhum*, but the holster I didn't have a chance to search—and it wasn't included in my laundry. The holster, please, or do you wish to give another strip-tease demonstration?"

Alicia gasped, "You pig!"

She struck at Angus' face with a clenched hand, the nails of which were long and pointed. Angus ducked under the hand and his right arm clamped about Alicia's waist. He lifted her clear of the floor and she twisted as sinuously as a snake. The silk was slippery against her velvet-sheathed muscles, and Angus staggered. He caromed against a screen set across the corner where the window was, and the screen collapsed to the floor with a clap like a gunshot.

Angus set Alicia down, looking at the open window, at an open wicker basket set upon a small table. Its hinged top was propped open. Alicia backed slowly away until her fluid hips were propped against the dressing table.

"A window open on a night like this when you are . . . in negligee?" Angus said idly. "A warm-blooded little thing, aren't you?"

The sill of the window was mottled with white. Angus rested a hand briefly on the wicker basket.

"Never mind the holster," he said gently.

Alicia's voice came out hurriedly, whispering. "The basket is for Scheherazade, my cat!"

"For a cat, eh?" Angus' voice seemed absent, almost bemused. "Surely, my dear, you mean a *cat-bird?*"

Alicia uttered a strangled cry. From behind her, she whipped a short-barreled revolver. She fired it point-blank at Angus!

CHAPTER IV.

DEATH IN THE FLIES.

Angus Saint-Cloud's prize-ring training had taught him to read each beginning movement of an opponent in muscles or eyes. He caught the threat in the sudden wide blazing of Alicia's eyes, and when the gun blasted, he was already in motion. His body swayed smoothly to one side—and the wicked basket sailed across the room!

An instant after that gunshot, the basket whacked blindingly across Alicia's face. She gasped under the impact, reeled away from the dressing table, and was suddenly running. She yanked open the door, and her scream echoed hollowly through the empty flies above the stage. Her high heels raised a terrific clatter upon the iron steps.

For an instant, Angus delayed in the room. He caught up the wicker basket and put it back as it was upon the table beside the open window; then he darted to the door. Alicia was at the bottom of the flight. Her bright-green negligee streamed back gayly. Angus vaulted to the iron railing, poised a moment, and then leaped out into space! But it was not a blind dive. His gloved hands clamped about one of the myriad ropes that supported the flied scenery of the theater, and he shot downward swiftly, but with controlled speed.

Alicia uttered another sharp cry as he landed on the floor just beside her. His hand stabbed out, seized the gun in the instant before she pulled the trigger, clamped down hard on the revolving chamber so that it could not turn. Alicia fought to pull the trigger, and could not.

Angus smiled into her anger-distorted face. "I really can't allow you to shoot me," he said gently. "It might be murder!"

With a rasping curse, Alicia released the gun and turned to run toward the exit. She leaped over the unconscious guard, wrenched at the knob.

"I forgot to tell you," Angus said, "the door is locked! Better come and consult with me about the catbird cage, Alicia!"

Alicia whirled, shoulders against the door, and, suddenly, the anger was gone from her face. She was smiling, almost happily, and at that same moment, Angus caught a faint, a very faint, sound. It was a mechanical squeak, like the opening of an unoiled door hinge. A shout formed in Angus' throat and he leaped violently forward. Something brushed past his shoulders with a force that drove him, staggering, to his knees, and behind him there was a heavy, solid impact, Under his hands and knees, the floor quivered!

When Angus bounced to his feet, his face was a little pale. Where he had stood an instant before, a sandbag counterweight was sagging to the floor. It had burst under the impact of its fall from the flies, forty feet above, and its weight was fully a hundred pounds! But for that faint warning creak of the sandbag halyard pulley, he would have been crushed to death!

But there was no time to speculate on that fact. Toward him, across the width of the darkened stage, two men were running, and guns glinted in their fists!

Angus took a sideways leap that

interposed a flimsy canvas scenery screen between himself and those guns. His hand flicked out to a battery of spotlights and instantly, a dazzling beam of light slashed toward the two gunmen. It struck blindingly across their eyes. Their guns bellowed hollowly, and lead spatted against the spotlight. Glass tinkled to the floor and the dimness of the empty stage crowded down again.

Angus called, "This way!" His voice was strained. His hands were locked about the rope of the sandbag that had so narrowly escaped killing him. He was swinging the sandbag, higher, higher. He pivoted on his heel and whirled it in a great circle about him. White sand spewed from the torn sack, rattled like wind-driven hail.

At Angus' cry, the two gunmen wheeled toward him—and Angus let go the sandbag. It hurtled straight toward the killers! Their guns spat out long streamers of crimson flame, but they fired confusedly at the half-seen sandbag. It struck the first man, hammered him viciously to the floor—and Angus was upon the second gunman while he was still trying to stumble aside. His fist made a flat, smacking thud against the man's jaw.

Afterward, Angus turned to where Alicia still crouched against the door. His chest was lifting jerkily to his breathing. The smile on his face was twisted with strain. Alicia whirled and began to hammer on the locked door with her fists.

Angus reached her with long strides, handcuffed her to a steam pipe and set about hauling the unconscious men together where he could search and bind them. He studied their senseless faces, shook his head.

"Alicia," he said quietly, "you may be able to avoid taking the rap for Milbanks' murder if you'll talk now. The leader isn't among these men. None of them has the intelligence to think up that extortion scheme, and neither have you. Tell me the leader's name!"

Alicia was huddled against the steam pipe for warmth. She showed her teeth. "You are mad," she said. "I was kidnaped!"

Angus shook his head. "That won't hold water," he said. "I phoned Boggs earlier in the afternoon, pretended to be a collector interested in seeing the Purple Emerald. He said it wasn't 'available.' When I came after you, because of your connection with the other two victimized men, you were frantic to leave me, to get away, as if you had the emerald in your possession. You knew who I was. But you didn't have the emerald."

Alicia's smile was angry. "I was kidnaped!"

Angus nodded. He unlocked the handcuff from the steam pipe, led Alicia toward the door. She hung back.

"Wait! Where are we going? Where are you taking me?"

Angus blinked mildly. "Why, to the police station to swear out a warrant against these terrible, insulting kidnapers! If you refuse, I shall charge you with the theft of the emerald—and cite the very hungry Scheherazade as evidence!"

For an instant, Alicia struggled against his grip, then she relented. Her head swung forward, and the heavy locks of her dark-red hair swung across her face like a veil.

"You are right," she said sullenly. "I wanted the emerald, I double-crossed these men, but—" She threw up her head. "I swear to you I do not know the leader. I have never seen him!"

Angus drew in a quick breath, while his eyes, bored into the amber gaze of the woman. He nodded, snapped her handcuff to the steam-pipe again and ran to a wall telephone, where he quickly got in touch again with Gold Seal.

"Miller," he said, "did you reach Boggs in time?"

Miller's voice came angrily over the wire. "He said the emerald had been stolen," he yelled. "Accused me of knowing it and trying to evade payment. Do you realize how much premium that man pays us every year? Damn it, Angus, if you slip up on this and make him cancel his other policies with us, I'll—"

Angus hung up the receiver and stared blankly at the wall, presently dialed the phone number of Emil Boggs.

"Angus Saint-Cloud, of Gold Seal," he identified himself to Boggs. "Guard yourself very carefully during the next half hour, Mr. Boggs. Why only for a half hour? Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Boggs. At the end of that time, the crooks who have your emerald will be turned over to the police—or there is a good chance that you or I will be dead! Yes. I'm going to meet Xerxes, and I'm afraid the gang will think that you told the insurance company the truth! I hope to see you presently—alive!"

He whipped away from the telephone and ran to free Alicia from the steam pipe, wrenched open the door.

"Where are we going?" Alicia demanded. "Damn you, I won't go to the police! Where are we going?"

Angus laughed lightly as he guided Alicia out of the alley beside the theater. "Since you won't or can't talk, my dear," he said. "We are going to call on a friend of mine to borrow a goshawk*, which I may explain is a type of falcon which seizes and binds to its prey!"

"A . . . a falcon!" Alicia stammered. She beat her small white fists together.

"Watch your negligee, my dear," Angus said. "Your attire is somewhat informal! Yes, a falcon, and afterward we are going to visit some iddy-fiddies which swim and blow bubble of neon light—at which point I will arrest, or kill, the leader of your extortion gang. Unless he kills me first." Angus' lips were smiling, but his eyes were chill as steel. "Hurry, my dear, or we will be too late to meet Xerxes in person! We have to arrive while it is still daylight!"

As he spoke, he turned the corner toward where he had parked his roadster and checked with an oath that he just stopped on his lips. There was a crowd of people around the car, and a mounted policeman was swinging from his saddle to peer inside. It would be only a matter of moments before they identified the car, through the license.

As yet, he did not believe the police were looking for him by name in connection with the death in the hotel. But there would be no such

* Author's Note:—The goshawk is not a true falcon, but belongs rather to the short-winged hawks; nevertheless from the fact that it is used in the ancient sport of falconry, by which young or wild birds were trained to take small game for their human masters, it is termed, by courtesy, a falcon. The sport of falconry is of great antiquity, and has survived its early purpose of gathering game for the larder, to exist today only as an amusement, much as the modern hunter goes into the field with a gun. Falconry has never died out in England, and there are several American falconry clubs which date back to the early days of the colonies and still are active. One of the most famous of these is in New York State. Accordingly, it was easily possible for Angus Saint-Cloud, moving in the circles that he did, to have a friend who followed the sport of falconry, and thus could supply him with a goshawk. This type of hawk was essential to Angus' purposes, since it belongs to the *accipiter* genus which seizes and binds to its prey with its talons. The true falcon kills by a stoop, or steep dive, in which it strikes at the head of its prey with a closed fist. So severe is the shock of this blow that the true falcon kills its prey instantaneously.

luck here! Within minutes, the whole city would be hunting Angus Saint-Cloud for a particularly senseless and brutal murder!

CHAPTER V.
DEATH'S WINGS.

Angus Saint-Cloud converted his startled halt at discovery of the crowd around his car, into a hesitant turn toward a taxi parked at the curb. A sign on its door read: Heated.

"I'm sure you'll be more comfortable riding, my dear," Angus murmured, for the benefit of the taxi driver as he handed Alicia into the cab. "Some of the cabs bearing these signs actually are heated!"

"Mister," the taxi driver grunted, "in my cab, you'll be plenty hot!"

Angus smiled faintly as he closed the door. "I'm already too *hot* for comfort," he murmured as the cab swept past the cop and the dead Chinese in his car. There was a sharp knife-crease between his brows. This would need to be very fast indeed. He had to snare the leader of the extortion gang before the fading day turned to night, or he would never do it! If the police once got their hands on him, his chances of killing the murder charges would be extremely slim!

"Your boy friend had a Chinese servant, didn't he?" he asked quietly. "Good! That makes my case complete. You see, if he had happened to be the driver of that laundry truck— Your pals forced your servant to bring me a package of laundry. When I kidnaped him, they killed him so he couldn't talk. Your pals believe in direct action!"

Alicia huddled in her corner and did not speak. Her eyes gleamed with fear and hatred. Nor did she speak while they were at the house of Angus' friend, from which he emerged to the taxi again, with the hooded falcon on his gloved fist.

"Cheez!" the taxi driver gasped. "Now what?"

"Now," Angus said gently, "you will drive me to the electric sign where the iddy-fiddies swim!"

"You mean that great big sign just off Broadway?" the driver gulped.

Angus nodded. "And hurry! It's a life-and-death matter." He almost forgot to smile.

When the cab lurched to a halt beside the dingy three-story building on whose roof the skeleton steel of the huge electric sign was erected, he had to force Alicia from the cab. She looked fearfully about as he urged her across the sidewalk on which the homeward-bound workers were beginning to throng. Dusk was gathering in the street, though the sky still showed faintly yellow with sunlight. The street held only small shops, and a single parking garage. Alicia held back as Angus thrust her through a narrow doorway, toward wooden steps that slanted upward into dimness.

"Oh, what are you going to do with me?" she pleaded.

Angus laughed, and his tone was a little strained. "You, dear, are going to attract for me the audience that I need. Afterward, we will see whether I think you had a hand in the Milbanks murder—or merely in robbing Maurice of the statue of Isis!"

Alicia gasped, "Oh, no! I . . . I *loved* Raoul Milbanks!"

As Angus pushed open the door of the stairway kiosk that opened on the roof of the building, the big electric sign began to blaze with lights, green and blue and crimson and gold. Fish, executed in long tubes of glass, began to swim jerkily

about and circles of golden lights arose from their parted mouths. Angus shot a quick glance about, and laughed again as his eyes fell on the opposite roof.

"We play in luck, my dear!" he cried. "I shall have to lose a twenty-dollar pair of shoes, but it will be worth it to trap the crook—and incidentally, of course, save my own neck!"

He fastened the leather jesses, that were bound to the falcon's feet, to a steel stringer of the sign, snipped the handcuff again on Alicia's wrist.

"Now, my dear," he said quietly, "we are going to climb to the top of this sign, and we are going up the front of it where everyone in the street can see us very clearly. Remember your audience, and don't hold the negligee too closely about you!"

Alicia fought for a while against Angus' compulsion, and then her hard anger flashed out. "You fool, you are going to your death!" she cried. "And I . . . I shall be happy to dance at your funeral!"

Angus made no answer as he toiled up the steel framework with Alicia. He knew that what Alicia said might well be truth! He fastened her handcuff to the topmost strut of the sign, climbed back down for the hooded falcon. The coldness of the steel burned through his glove. The hawk made protesting harsh sounds under its hood. Finally, Angus sat down on the topmost beam of the sign beside Alicia and began to take off his shoes.

"You see the truck in which you did the strip-tease," he said, "comes from the laundry next door to the parking garage. In one place or the other, or nearby, your friends whom you double-crossed will have a hide-out. I'm quite certain the leader will be with them!"

He poised his shoe and hurled it far out over the street toward the opposite roof, caught up the second one in his fist. Two pigeons took off with a whirring of their wings, but others remained motionless there. Angus poised the other shoe.

"When they see me fly the falcon at one of these pigeons, which as I fortunately remembered are always circling near here, they will come to kill me, Alicia!"

Alicia was shivering. "I hope they do!" she said with a slow viciousness. "But unfortunately, the pigeon will mean nothing to them!"

Angus was stripping off the falcon's hood. "You underestimate their leader, my dear!" he said. "Also, they will recognize you!"

The pigeons were wheeling in swift, low circles against the deepening sky. The falcon on Angus' wrist ruffled its wings and uttered a harsh cry. Angus held it until the bird had twice roused, eyes lifted piercingly toward the circling pigeons. Then Angus lifted his wrist and launched the falcon into the air!

People stopped in the street, staring upward. And as the falcon soared higher, Angus saw several men run out of the parking garage to peer upward also. The pigeons were swift, but not swift enough, even in their panic. The high-flying falcon folded its wings and stooped toward the flock, struck and fastened to one of the birds. For a while, the two birds fell downward, then the hawk's wings spread and it began to lift. Angus piped shrilly on a small silver whistle, held out his gloved fist for the hawk.

"Three men from the garage are coming toward the building," Angus said, and laughed. "If I am not mistaken, one of them is carrying a rifle

thrust down into his trousers leg! I know of no other reason why he should walk with one knee stiff! I need that rifle! Yes, they are undoubtedly on their way here to kill me, and perhaps you!"

As he spoke, the hawk swooped to his fist, and Angus swiftly hooded it, tied its jesses to the steel and held the limp body of the pigeon in his hands. The girl laughed, too, and the sound was harsh.

"They won't kill me!" she cried. "I have something to bargain with! The emerald!"

Angus regarded her quietly. He stood erect, holding the pigeon in his hand, and his silk-socked feet were numb with the cold of the steel. A cold wind was thrusting at his coat.

"No, Alicia," he said gently, "you haven't got the emerald. You have nothing to bargain with. If you are wise, you will help me now."

He turned away from her and began to walk the steel beam carefully. The end toward which he moved projected out over the street a short distance, a street that was a good six stories below. His lips held to their smile, fiercely. He turned to face toward the kiosk. Three men wedged out of the doorway, and the leader carried a rifle with a curious thick tube attached to its end. He braced his shoulders against the kiosk, lifted the rifle!

Angus held out the pigeon. "If you shoot," he called clearly, "I'll fall into the street, and you'll never get the emerald! You'll only get —the bird!"

Angus saw a minute speck of flame jet from the muzzle of the rifle and something cracked through the air

near his head! He wavered, almost lost his balance—and the other two men suddenly jumped upon the rifleman, pulled the weapon from his shoulder!

"You see?" Angus called, his voice thin against the wind. "Your men want the emerald, even if you don't!"

The man's voice came up to Angus in a snarl. "You come down off that, or I'll come up after you!"

Angus peered down at the men. The waves of colored light from the sign flickered over them, but he could not make out their faces. He had flown the falcon just in time. A short while later, and it would have been too dark. Above the wind, he caught the faint whimper of a siren and saw a white-topped police car skid to a halt in the street. He caught the blur of the men's faces before they darted into the building, too. He hoped the killers below him hadn't heard. It took such a little while for a man to be shot to death.

"Better hurry!" Angus called. "I might fall off before you could come after me!"

The leader was climbing rapidly, but he had had to leave the rifle behind. He was just beyond Alicia, crouched behind her now on the topmost steel beam.

"All right, Saint-Cloud!" he said harshly. "Throw that pigeon down to the roof, and do it quickly. If I shoot you from here, you'll fall on the roof, anyhow! You fool!"

Angus nodded, and his glasses glittered in the flickering light. The leader's face remained in shadow.

"You're quite sure you want me to throw the pigeon?" he asked. "I might make you a trade, the pigeon for . . . the statue of Isis!"

For an instant, the man did not speak, then his voice came out in a low, vicious whisper. "That's torn it!" he said. "Now you're finished!"

"Finish him!" Alicia cried suddenly. "Oh, hurry! He hasn't found Xerxes. *He hasn't got the emerald! I have!*"

With a harsh oath, the man straightened and leveled the revolver at arm's length, carefully.

Angus' laughter came out wildly. "That's not news to him, Alicia. Not news to the boss of the extortion ring! You see, Alicia, he knew all the time I didn't have the emerald. Even Xerxes has only a fake emerald. *Isn't that true, Boggs!*"

The gun blasted out its fiery lance into the night, and Angus threw the pigeon. He threw it with all the power of his arm, straight at the face of the man with the gun—straight at the face of Emil Boggs!

The violence of the throw tipped Angus off balance so that he plunged toward the steel beam. He grabbed at it frantically with both arms. He slipped a little sideways, managed to hook a knee over the beam. And all the while, a man's scream pierced his eardrums. The scream lifted shrilly, up and up. It grew faint, and then it broke off. Afterward, Angus heard the solid, muted thud of the man's body, of Emil Boggs' body, striking the roof!

When Angus could lift his head, the police were on the roof, and the other two gangsters had thrown down their guns. It took Angus quite a while to reach Alicia and begin to take off the handcuffs. The police were shouting angrily.

"Be right down," Angus called. "Take good care of that rifle!"

Alicia's face was twisted whitely. "Emil Boggs," she whispered. "It was Emil! But it couldn't be. He . . . we were blackmailing him!"

Angus' laughter was rather shaky.

"Boggs was afraid we would become suspicious of him, because he knew, as we did, that the kind of loot he was getting could be disposed of only through a collector like himself! So he framed this robbery of himself to be able to carry on his smart racket! I'll confess I wasn't suspicious of him until he denied that he still held the emerald, *when I knew it hadn't been sent to you!*"

A cop's voice lifted harshly. "Don't try anything, Saint-Cloud! You're wanted for three murders now, and we don't mind shooting!"

A frown cut Angus' forehead, and he began to help the cold-stiffened Alicia down from the sign. If only he could force Alicia to confess, he would clear up those murders—three murders now. If she wouldn't—

"I know every detail of the case," he said rapidly. "When you tried the double cross, it put Boggs in a bad spot. He didn't know how much you knew, or how much you had told your boy friend. He had to kill him, kill the Chinese, too. The only reason he hasn't killed you is that he had to recover the fake emerald he would fasten to the homing pigeon you had sent to him, the pigeon named Xerxes, whose leg band I found in your boy friend's pocket! A while ago, when I told him I had the emerald, he was willing to risk killing me, because he knew the emerald would be a fake. His men weren't in on the game, so they stopped him from shooting at me a second time!"

The descent of the steel sign was finished. The police closed in on Angus warily. The sergeant had a grizzled mustache, and his jaw was hard.

"Now then, Saint-Cloud," he said harshly, "stick out your fists for the bracelets. We got you, for three murders!

Angus shook his head jauntily, "Not at all, the rifle there on the roof has Boggs' fingerprints on it, and the bullets from it will match with those in the body of the man at the Wardwell Hotel and the Chinese in my car. Boggs killed them! As for Boggs, he tried to kill me there on the sign. I shall soon prove, with this young lady's testimony, that Boggs was a thief who arranged a fake robbery of himself to turn suspicion away from him!

"He had his own gang, which didn't know his real identity, threaten him with death. To buy himself off, he was supposed to fasten the Purple Emerald to a champion homing pigeon named Xerxes, and let the pigeon loose. You'll believe me when you see the fake emerald fastened to the pigeon!"

The sergeant grunted, "Ain't no emerald fastened to that pigeon. I looked at it!"

"Of course not," Angus agreed. "That pigeon isn't Xerxes! I knew these pigeons were here, and that the gang headquarters was here, so I flew a falcon at any old pigeon to lure them into my trap. They couldn't know that the pigeon wasn't Xerxes!"

"Now I got you!" the sergeant cried. "You couldn't know nothing about the pigeon without you were in the gang!"

Angus shrugged a little wearily. He lifted one foot and set it atop the other. They were cold.

"Certainly I could know, by simple deduction," Angus said. "Alicia's boy friend here, besides a pigeon leg-band labeled Xerxes, had some bird seed in his pocket. Not, admittedly, the best food for a pigeon, but it wouldn't attract suspicion, either, when he bought it.

Presently, I shall lead you to Xerxes and the fake jewel!"

Alicia lifted her head, and there was resignation in her face. "You knew that, too?" she asked heavily.

Angus nodded. "Of course, my dear! Xerxes had been trained to fly to that wicker cage in your dressing room at the theater. Before I left, I set the trap for him again. He'll be there!"

Alicia's head sagged. "He's too much for me," she said wearily. "He's telling the truth. But it beats me how he knew Boggs was guilty. I didn't!"

Angus shook his head. "I didn't know it until Miller said over the phone that Boggs had told him the emerald was already gone—whereas I knew it had not yet been flown away."

"But how could you *know?*" Alicia cried.

"It's a matter of a cat that eats *baba au rhum,*" Angus said casually. "Not customary food, even for a Persian named Scheherazade. You had starved the cat, and were carrying it with you. Therefore, you were on your way to get the emerald!"

The sergeant said hoarsely. "Now, who's nuts! What the hell has a starving cat got to do with it?"

Angus smiled gently. "Surely you see, sergeant? Once the pigeon had delivered the emerald, the possession of the pigeon, which could be identified, became very dangerous to the thief. And you can't just turn a pigeon loose and expect it to go away—not a homing pigeon! And there is only one certain way to destroy a pigeon. Ingestion!"

The sergeant said slowly, "Say that again?"

Angus nodded cheerfully. "Why, certainly, sergeant. A pigeon furnishes a pretty big meal for any cat, unless that cat has been carefully starved in advance. You get the picture, I trust?"

The sergeant said, "Well, I'll be damned! You got all this from a couple of bird seed, and the fact that the cat was eating . . . eating—"

"Baba au rhum," Angus supplied gently. "Now, sergeant, if you don't mind, before we go to get the emerald, and to reclaim the statue of Isis, which undoubtedly will be hidden among Boggs' collection, can we go to the roof across the street? Yes. You see, I threw my shoes there—and they cost twenty dollars."

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders heavily. "It's O. K. by me, Saint-Cloud. I reckon your story's all right." He looked down where Boggs lay beside the dead pigeon that had killed him. He laughed suddenly, hoarsely. "Cripes, what a way for a guy to get the bird!"

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Carrie Cashin is on the job when

DEATH LIGHTS A CANDLE

by THEODORE TINSLEY

CHAPTER I.

SCREWY STICK-UP.

The man was very distinguished-looking. He wore gray gloves, gray-striped trousers and a cutaway coat. His beard was bushy and black. He looked like a foreign diplomat out for a Fifth Avenue stroll.

But the man wasn't strolling. He stood motionless near the center of the block, completely indifferent to

the stares of the other pedestrians. He devoted all his attention to the candle he was holding.

The candle was a fat, red one, like the sort used at Christmas. Its wick was lighted. After a moment the bearded gentleman blew the candle out. He immediately scratched a match and relighted it.

It seemed a queer thing to do on Fifth Avenue. But the bearded gentleman kept right on doing it.

"Drunk!" somebody whispered.

The bearded man was not drunk. If he swayed slightly, it was because his knees were trembling. His gaunt eyes seemed older than the rest of his face. They looked starved.

More and more people were stopping. Cars slowed down as drivers noted the cause of the sidewalk crowd. Horns tooted impatiently. Up at the corner an angry traffic cop blew his whistle vainly to start things moving. Then he came striding toward the center of the commotion.

The cop's jaw dropped as he saw what was going on. Then his voice rasped.

"What's the idea?"

The bearded man blew out his candle. He lit it again.

"Is there any law against this?"

"No. But—"

"Then stop annoying me. You're only making yourself ridiculous to your visible audience. Remarks like that won't get you any applause cards, officer. You'd do much better to make a graceful exit."

The voice of the bearded man was slow and sonorous. The cop's ears got red as he heard laughter in the crowd.

"Oh, yeah? There's laws about disorderly conduct and obstructing traffic."

The bearded man blew out his red candle. He started to scratch another match. The cop angrily snatched the candle away from him.

"Beat it—or I'll run you in!"

The man shrugged.

"Very well. I submit under protest to a palpable injustice. As Hamlet once said: 'Farewell! The rest is silence!'"

He turned away, leaving the policeman holding the candle. There was a car parked at the curb and the bearded man got in and drove away. Mechanically, the cop noted the numerals on the vanishing license plate. His ears were still red.

"Wacky!" he growled under his breath.

The next moment all hell broke loose around the corner!

A siren screeched with an earsplitting clamor. It kept screeching steadily, drowning out the dimmer clanging of a bell. In all that sudden uproar, the motor hum of a speeding black sedan was scarcely audible.

The sedan shot abruptly out of the side street. It whizzed across Fifth Avenue, traveling at a terrific clip.

There were two men in it, crouched low in the front seat. They disregarded a red stop light and roared westward through the stream of avenue traffic. They were gone before the paralyzed cop could yank out his gun.

Even if he had been able to draw his weapon, the cop could not have stopped that fleeing sedan. He was too far from the corner to aim accurately at a tire. A blind spraying of bullets would have meant the death of innocent people. Terrified drivers had skidded into a tangled mess. A truck had knocked over a light pole, showering the intersection with broken glass.

The dazed cop ran pell-mell around the corner toward the granite

portal of a bank. The scream of the siren came from above the bank's doorway. Every burglar alarm in the place was going full blast.

The cop sprang inside.

To the left, within a railed inclosure, he recognized the pale face of Harley Dixon, president of the bank. Dixon was down on his dapper knees, peering with terror over the top of his desk. A bullet scar along the desk's walnut surface explained why the bank's dignified president had ducked so hastily.

Toward the rear of the bank a gray-uniformed special officer lay flat on his face near the top of a flight of marble steps that led below to the safe-deposit vault. He looked dead, but he wasn't. He had been slugged unconscious by the butt of a gun. Blood welled from a nasty lump on the back of his scalp.

There were no signs of any other bank employees, or of customers.

The policeman found the customers at the foot of the marble steps. They were cowering there, afraid to move. The wail of the bank's siren made it hard to understand a dozen voices shouting at once, but the cop got the gist of it quickly.

There had been two robbers, both masked. One had sprung toward the receiving teller's window with drawn gun. The other had forced the customers and the uniformed guard down the basement stairs. The guard had tried to resist and had been slugged. There had been two shots upstairs.

"*Two* shots?" the cop cried.

He had seen the mark of only one —the bullet that had nearly killed the bank's president. What had happened to the other bullet? The cop ran up the marble stairs and raced toward the empty grilles of the teller's windows.

Peering, he saw a half dozen white-jacketed employees rising slowly from the floor where they had prudently flung themselves. But one of them didn't rise. He lay crumpled behind the receiving teller's window, with a bullet hole through his head.

The cop's glance lifted from the corpse to the counter just inside the window. He expected it to be swept clear of currency. But to his surprise there was plenty of money within easy reach. Apparently not a dollar had been stolen. The only currency out of place was a sheaf of bills lying on the floor close to the body of the dead man.

A clutch at his arm roused the bewildered cop. Harley Dixon had staggered out of his railed inclosure up front. He was babbling excitedly.

"Two of them! Masked! They killed Manix—tried to shoot me on the way out. They escaped in a black sedan—"

"Did they get away with anything?"

"No! They fled empty-handed. The siren must have scared them off."

"Scared?" the cop growled. "Not *those* guys! The fellow that killed the teller could have reached in and grabbed himself an armful of dough. Yet he didn't steal a dime! This holdup doesn't make sense!"

He glanced dazedly at the red candle in his left hand. It was the one he had snatched from the bearded gentleman in the cutaway. It reminded him how neatly he had been lured from his post on the corner—to permit two masked thieves an easy getaway.

The cop was suddenly glad that he had noted the license number of the bearded man's car.

"This thing couldn't be any

screwier," he growled uneasily to Harley Dixon.

He was wrong. He found that out after the arrival of Inspector Berrigan's squad from police headquarters. Berrigan and his men made a swift preliminary investigation. They discovered something that changed this already wacky bank holdup into a case that bordered on the psychopathic.

The two masked crooks who had killed the teller had not merely refrained from stealing a dime of the bank's money. They had donated to the bank a thousand dollars of their own!

And the dead receiving teller *wasn't* the receiving teller!

CHAPTER II.

AN ACTOR EXITS.

Some of the excitement had quieted down by the time that Carrie Cashin and Aleck arrived at the bank. But there was a tremendous crowd on the sidewalk. Half a dozen cops guarded the bank's doorway.

Carrie Cashin and her big broad-shouldered assistant exchanged a surprised look. They had expected a quiet preliminary interview with a bank official who had that morning requested their help. They hadn't even received a retaining fee.

They always insisted on their fee in advance. That was the standing rule of the "Cash and Carry" Detective Agency. Aleck posed as the head of the firm because most clients had a silly prejudice against women detectives. Few people knew that Carrie herself had founded the agency—or that "Cash and Carry" was an amusing reversal of her own name.

She and Aleck shoved through the crowd. There were growls and mutters, but they got close to the bank door because Carrie did most of the pushing. It was hard for anyone to get angry with a girl as pretty as Carrie. She looked as cute and young as a high-school senior.

But her charms didn't work with the cop on guard at the door. They stuck there, trying to argue their way inside, until Aleck recognized a familiar figure and yelled.

"Hey, inspector! Inspector Berrigan!"

Berrigan turned around with a scowl. Then he grinned. He came over and chucked Carrie under the chin.

"Hello, kitten! When are you going to quit working for this big lug and get married? Sorry, but I can't let you folks in. There's nothing here to interest a private dick, Aleck. It's a bank holdup."

"The heck with the holdup," Aleck growled. "We've got a client in there. He asked the agency to protect him."

"Is that a bluff to get in?"

"Not at all," Aleck said. "The guy claimed somebody was trying to kill him. He was almost bumped last night in an automobile accident. He suspected the accident was phony. I promised to investigate if the case interested Car—er, me."

"Who's your client?"

"A fellow named Mannix. Louis Mannix."

Berrigan looked grimly at them.

"You haven't got any client. Mannix is the guy that was killed!"

Carrie and Aleck followed the police inspector into the bank. They listened to his story of the swift raid of two masked men. They talked to Harley Dixon, the bank president, who shuddered every time he noticed the bullet hole in his walnut desk. Aleck also interviewed the bank's special officer. By this

time he had recovered from his crack on the skull, and was slumped on a bench looking sick and pale.

It all added up to zero.

"Wait'll I tell you about the money," Berrigan said sourly. "The holdup men didn't steal a nickel! They donated a thousand bucks of their own to the bank!"

"What!"

"I'm not kidding. We checked the receiving teller's accounts. Not a penny missing. And there's a thousand bucks lying on the floor beside the body. The holdup men tossed it there right after they shot him. In other words, they hold up a bank to deposit money! Can you tie that?"

A quick sparkle glinted in Carrie Cashin's brown eyes, but she masked it. When she spoke, her voice sounded timid and girlish.

"I thought you said Mannix was killed."

"I did."

"How can that be if the receiving teller was shot? Louis Mannix was the cashier. He surely wouldn't be in the receiving teller's cage."

"Didn't I warn you this case was a mess?" Berrigan growled. "Mannix was in the teller's cage purely by chance. He took Brentwood's place because Brentwood was out for lunch."

"I'd like to talk to Brentwood," Carrie said.

"So would I, damn it! He can't be found. The guy took a powder!"

"You mean you let him walk out after he came back from lunch?"

"He never came back. He never even had lunch! I sent a man over to the Buckingham Grill, where Brentwood eats. He never showed up there today."

Berrigan chewed savagely at his lip.

"I've got men watching every airport, ferry terminal, bridges and railroad station. But I've got a hunch that we're not going to find the guy that easily!"

"May we look at Mannix's body?" Carrie Cashin asked.

The dead cashier hadn't been moved. He lay where he had tumbled to the floor from his stool. The bullet hole made his face gory. But even without the blood Carrie decided she wouldn't have liked this Louis Mannix any too well.

He was a youngish man with a fat, middle-aged face. His hands were soft, with nails as well kept as a woman's. Everything about him testified to pampered indulgence. Even the wrinkles at his wide-open sightless eyes had a look of sleek luxury.

The money which a masked killer had tossed to the floor lay close to Mannix's outstrecthed hand. There were ten one-hundred-dollar bills. The dead cashier's fingers clutched the stub of a pencil. The sight of the pencil and the thousand dollars made Carrie's pretty face flush.

"I'll make you a bet, inspector! When you check those bills you'll find that they're neither hot, counterfeit, nor kidnap ransom money. Want to bet?"

"Not me. I've already checked. There's nothing crooked about that dough. How did you know?"

"Feminine intuition," Carrie smiled. She changed the subject. "Have you searched Mannix's pockets?"

Berrigan showed her a miscellaneous pile on the receiving teller's desk. There was some small change, a cigarette case, matches, a handkerchief and a leather pad of keys. Carrie looked intently at the keys. One of them was a safe-deposit key. It belonged to a box in the vault downstairs.

"Can't do anything about the key until I get a court order," Berrigan said.

He and Aleck began to talk in undertones until a brisk little cry from Carrie Cashin made them turn around. She was pointing toward a policeman who sat on a marble bench, looking worried and unhappy. The cop was holding a fat red candle.

"Where did that come from?" Carrie asked. "Don't tell me the holdup men left that, too?"

Berrigan scowled.

"I forgot all about the damned candle!"

He told Aleck about the bearded man in the cutaway who had so neatly lured the corner traffic cop from his post.

"Rafferty was smart enough to note the car's license number. But it didn't help."

"Stolen?"

"Right! It was found about two miles away. Abandoned at the curb. Which leaves us right where we were before. Stumped!"

Carrie Cashin wasn't stumped, but she pretended to be. She made Patrolman Rafferty repeat everything the bearded man had said during their brief sidewalk conversation.

"Silly," she agreed.

But Aleck, watching her, caught a signal. He made a deft excuse to Inspector Berrigan. Carrie departed with him, looking as cute and sweet as a frosted vanilla.

The moment they were outside the bank, her whole manner changed. Her voice became curt.

"So far the case seems fairly simple."

Aleck stared at her. "A couple of killers stick up a bank and murder a man, in order to donate a thousand bucks of their own—and you call that simple?"

"The robbers donated nothing. The money belonged to Mannix!"

"How do you know?"

"Oh, Aleck, don't be so dense! Call a taxi—quick! I'm in a hurry!"

"Where are we going?"

"To meet the bearded gentleman with the red candle."

"You mean to tell me that you—"

"Doggone you, Aleck, get a taxi!"

When she sparkled like that, Aleck always jumped. In two minutes they were in a cab. Carrie told the driver to take them to Radio City. Then she explained in a low voice.

"Everybody keeps saying the robbers left that money. They didn't! Mannix was a prospective client of ours. You yourself told him over the phone that we always demand our fee in advance. How much do we usually charge, darling?"

Aleck colored.

"A thousand bucks."

"There was a pencil in Mannix's dead hand. He grabbed that pencil as he fell, mortally wounded. He yanked our fee out of his pocket, tried to scrawl the name of his killer on the nearest bill—and died before he could move the pencil."

"What about the bearded guy?"

"Officer Rafferty told us plenty. Remember the man's sonorous voice and his starved, sunken eyes? Remember what he said? He mentioned Hamlet. But more important than that, he used words like *'invisible audience,' 'applause cards,'* a *'graceful exit.'*"

Carrie's brown eyes sparkled.

"He sounds to me like an old-time actor, reduced by hard luck to small parts in cheap radio serials. A talk with the casting director at Radio

City ought to give us his name and address without too much trouble."

Carrie's hunch was correct. The program director had little difficulty selecting a card from his big index of free-lance character actors.

"Sounds like Horace Duncan," he said. "He plays small rôles occasionally, but not often. Hasn't worked for us in over two months. I often wonder how the old guy keeps from starving."

Aleck looked grim, but he didn't say anything. He wrote down the man's name and address. The address was on the lower West Side.

It turned out to be a brick rooming house west of Hudson Street. A hatchet-faced landlady gave Aleck a toothy smile.

"Horace Duncan? Sure, he lives here. Are you from the lawyer's office? He said he had inherited some money.

"He's got plenty coming to him," Aleck said slowly. "Where's his room?"

"Third floor, rear. It's a good thing you showed up, mister! He owes me six weeks' back rent."

She stood watching them greedily as they went up the stairs.

Aleck knocked on Horace Duncan's door, but there was no answer. He rattled the knob. To his surprise, he found the door unlocked.

He stepped over the threshold. Then he froze.

Horace Duncan was sitting up stiffly in an old armchair. There was a deep stab wound in his chest. His vest and shirt were soaked with blood. His dead face was contorted in an expression of terrible agony.

The only light in the dim room came from the wick of a fat red candle. The lighted candle was held rigidly in the fingers of the dead man!

CHAPTER III.

THE NOOSE.

The sight of that grewsome corpse shocked Aleck into a loud exclamation of horror. But Carrie Cashin retained her wits. She clapped her palm over Aleck's mouth, stifling his cry. She tiptoed back to the dim staircase and peered downward. She wanted an opportunity for swift investigation before an alarm brought police and publicity.

There was no sign of the hatchet-faced landlady.

Carrie returned to the murder room and closed the door. Death had come swiftly to Horace Duncan. There was no evidence of struggle. Nothing was disarranged.

The dead man looked quite different from the description furnished by Officer Rafferty. His black hair and bushy beard were gone. He was an old man with thin, cavernous cheeks and a fringe of gray hair on a bald head.

"Duncan was killed by somebody he thought was bringing him a payoff," Aleck whispered. "But what's the idea of the candle?"

"The candle bothers me," Carrie admitted. "It made sense as a decoy to lure a policeman away from the bank. It doesn't make sense here."

"What's that funny smell?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe it's the smell of the candle wick."

"No. It's not the candle. It smells like scorched metal. Wait—I recognize it now! Did you ever smell hot lead solder in a plumber's melting pot?"

"Right!" Aleck agreed. "But why the devil should anyone—"

He moved toward the closed window with a troubled look. To reach the window he had to pass close by the dead actor. Suddenly he whirled

with a startled gasp.

"Good heavens—look!"

He was pointing at Duncan's mouth. The dead man's jaw hung partly open. He had been killed so recently that *rigor mortis* had not yet set in. Aleck was able to force the slack jaws wider apart.

Carrie felt sick horror as she gazed. The man's throat was horribly burned. His throat and gullet were completely stuffed with a plug of solid metal.

Molten lead had been poured into his mouth!

"Probably while he was still dying from the knife thrust in his chest," Aleck said with a white face. "What does it mean? A criminal symbol? A mark of vengeance?"

Carrie had never looked so baffled. She was frightened, too.

"It has something to do with the candle," she whispered tremulously. "But I can't understand what. It seems utterly senseless. That's what frightens me! Everything in this case looks so crazy—and everything has a sane, sinister purpose behind it."

She turned and stared at the floor. A dull twinkle caught her eye. She saw a tiny drop of hardened lead. It lay halfway between the corpse and the window.

Carrie Cashin sprang toward the window. The catch was not locked. But the sash was impossible to move. A quick glance showed Carrie the reason. The crack between the upper and lower sash had been filled with hot lead. The cooling metal had sealed the window hermetically tight.

"The killer didn't want us to notice the sealed window," Carrie gasped. "That's why he diverted our attention by that horrible stuff in the dead man's throat! He hoped that—"

A faint rustling sound behind her made her stop talking abruptly. The sound came from the closed door of the murder room. It was outside the door and close to the floor.

With a leap Aleck was across the room. He grabbed the knob and whirled it fiercely. The door was locked!

Aleck dropped to his knees and peered. In a moment he was up with a startled cry.

"Rags! Someone has stuffed rags under the crack!"

It puzzled him. But it absolutely terrified Carrie. She turned white as a sheet.

"Quick!" she screamed.

She whirled back toward the dead man. She snatched the red candle out of his hand. Aleck was at her side as she reached the sealed window. He sensed what she wanted him to do, and he swung his big gloved fist. The glass pane crashed into a jagged hole.

Through that hole Carrie Cashin hurled the red candle.

It fell into the shadowy courtyard behind the rooming house. The flame of the wick flickered, but it didn't go out. The candle rolled across the concrete pavement toward the fence.

There was a mongrel pup playing in the yard. The pup recoiled as the candle landed. Then with a shrill bark of excitement the pup returned to the strange object. He sniffed at it.

Carrie and Aleck stared frozenly downward, expecting a terrific explosion.

But no sound came. The flame of the wick suddenly turned purplish and went out. At the same instant a queer haze enveloped the spot where the sniffing dog was crouched. The dog uttered a brief, strangled

bark and tried to leap away.

He died in midair. His furry legs stiffened. He fell in a sprawled heap and rolled over. The queer vapor from the candle faded almost instantly. But the dog never moved.

"Gas!" Carrie whispered. "Poison gas! The murderer expected us to locate Horace Duncan's hide-out! We were meant to be gassed to death in a sealed room!"

The killer must be still in the house!" Aleck cried.

He flung himself at the locked door. Three battering assaults made a lot of noise, but it did the trick. The door splintered away from its frame. It spilled Aleck into the hallway. Carrie leaped after him.

They heard a scream from the foot of the staircase leading to the lower floor. The noise of Aleck's assault on the door had attracted the hatchet-faced landlady. She stood on the lower landing, staring in terror at the two grim faces that peered down.

"Did anyone run past you?" Aleck cried.

"No."

"Could anyone get to the street *without* passing you?"

"N-no."

"Who occupies the room directly over Horace Duncan's?" Carrie shrilled.

"That room isn't rented. It's empty."

Carrie whirled instantly. Aleck was at her heels as she raced upward to the top floor. The door of the upstairs room was locked. Aleck didn't waste any time trying to burst it in with his powerful shoulders. He yanked out his gun and sent scarlet streaks of flame spitting at the lock.

Bullets smashed the metal away from the wood. A fierce shove sent the ruined door banging open.

Aleck's gun jutted grimly into the room. There was no human target. The killer had already fled!

But a stout rope showed that there was no magic about that uncanny disappearance act. The rope was tied to a cheap metal bedstead. It led across the sill of the opened rear window and hung downward into space.

Aleck was at the window almost before his eyes understood the significance of the dangling rope. He leaned out over the sill, gun in hand, ready to send flame spurting downward at a desperately descending criminal.

There wasn't any criminal!

There wasn't even very much rope. It ended less than two feet below the level of the sill. The thing was a decoy! A murderer had deliberately flung that short stub of rope over the sill to induce Aleck to rush to the window and lean out.

Aleck straightened instantly. But he was too late.

A noose dropped with a swish over his lifting head. It came from the coping of the roof. The noose tightened with a murderous jerk.

Off balance across the sill, Aleck was unable to save himself. The gun fell from his hand. Both his hands were clawing at his purpling throat, trying to rip the death noose loose.

Carrie Cashin's clutch at her partner was too late. The unseen killer on the roof above jerked Aleck into empty air. But Carrie managed to throw an arm around his toppling body an instant before Aleck's twitching legs cleared the sill.

Carrie herself almost plunged to death with the weight of her strangling partner. Only her hooked legs kept her from toppling out the window. She was astride the sill, with

both arms desperately supporting Aleck.

Aleck couldn't help her. His strangled face was bluish. He sagged in her desperate grip, a dead weight. Carrie knew that if she stopped bracing him against the sill, his noosed body would fall like a plummet. The rope would tauten. The jerk would break his neck.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MISSING BRENTWOOD.

The strain on Carrie's back and shoulders was unbearable. She was in a blind haze of exhaustion.

That was when the bullet came!

It roared downward from the coping of the roof. It chipped a brick half an inch from Carrie's fatigue-twisted face. Another bullet smashed at the sill under her straining armpit.

The vicious savagery of the killer above turned slim, gentle little Carrie Cashin into something like a female maniac. Her left arm flashed away from Aleck for an instant. It dived with clawing desperation at her silken legs. Her legs were straddled over the sill, gripping with every inch of thigh and knee and calf.

The muscular strain of that straddled position had hoisted Carrie's skirt high. She didn't have to fumble to reach her garter holster. A single snatch yanked out the weapon and flung its muzzle upward.

It was a tiny gun of small caliber, but Carrie found it useful for quick and accurate shooting.

She emptied it at the gloved hand with the gun that projected over the roof's coping. Bullets spattered against the stone. None of them struck the killer's hand. The weight of Aleck on her other arm made accurate shooting impossible. But the slugs smashed close enough to make the hidden killer jerk his gloved hand out of sight.

Carrie didn't get a clear look at his face. It was just a meaningless blur. She heard the faint thump of fleeing feet. Then with a bone-wrenching, superhuman tug, she managed to tilt Aleck inward.

How she managed to drag him over the sill, she didn't know. When she recovered her wits, she found herself bending over Aleck, whispering a string of harsh oaths that she never realized until now that she knew! The noose was off Aleck's throat. His face was no longer purplish. He staggered to his feet, but he was pretty groggy. So was Carrie.

But neither of them hesitated. Weakness was unavoidable, but fear didn't exist for either of them. Carrie still had her tiny garter gun. Aleck had a pair of fists. Both of them raced out to the top floor hallway.

The hatchet-faced landlady was cowering on the staircase.

"The roof!" Carrie screamed at her. "How do we get up?"

The terrified landlady pointed a trembling finger at a hallway closet.

"There's a ladder inside. But it won't do you no good. The closet is always locked. I dunno where the key is."

They didn't need any key. The closet door opened without trouble at Aleck's frantic tug. Blurred toe prints on the dusty ladder rungs showed how swiftly the murderer of Horace Duncan had climbed.

The roof scuttle was open at the top of the closet. Carrie saw a clothesline rope fastened tightly to a chimney. But the killer had made good his escape. He had vanished through a scuttle on the adjoining

Aleck was at Carrie's heels as she raced desperately to the top floor!

roof. The adjoining roof was the only one on the same level with the rooming house. An airshaft beyond it was too wide for anyone to leap across.

The roof scuttle was fastened on the inside. Aleck tried to pry it loose, but the attempt was hopeless. Carrie didn't wait to watch. She ran to the front of the roof and peered into the street.

She was just in time to see a car zoom away from the curb. It raced to the corner at high speed and whizzed out of sight. It was impossible to see who drove it, or to catch a glimpse of the license number.

Carrie and Aleck returned grimly to the rooming-house roof and descended the closet ladder. They found the landlady lying unconscious across the threshold of Horace Duncan's room. Curiosity had induced her to peek in. The sight of the bloodstained corpse in the chair had dropped her in a dead faint.

To Carrie Cashin it was a piece of sheer luck.

"I was afraid she had already rushed out to scream for the police," Carrie panted. "We can't afford to be detained by cops right now. There's too much to do! We've got to nab a fellow named Harry Brentwood."

"Brentwood?" Aleck stared at his pretty boss. "You mean the receiving teller—the fellow who skipped from the bank just before Mannix, the cashier, took his place and got killed?"

"Of course."

"How the heck are you going to find him? The police have already—"

"You and the police make me tired," Carrie snapped. "You're doing your best to make this case harder than it is!"

They emerged on the sidewalk in front of the rooming house. With Aleck's arm tucked into hers, Carrie hurried to the corner and hailed a taxicab. She ordered the driver to stop at the nearest drugstore. Then she explained to Aleck in a swift undertone.

"The police are like you. They think of every possibility but the simplest! They're watching ferries and railroads and bridges. Where is the safest place to hide—if you were a hunted man, desperate for a quick chance to grab some clothes and money for a getaway?"

Aleck looked startled.

"Brentwood's own apartment, by gum! But where does he live?"

"We can find out by looking in a telephone directory. Here's the drugstore now! Come on! I want to make a quick phone call to Inspector Berrigan. If I don't warn him in a hurry, there may be another murder—a cop this time!"

Aleck didn't know what she was talking about until he heard her low whisper over the wire in a secluded telephone booth.

"Inspector Berrigan? . . . Have you still got that candle that the traffic cop snatched from the bearded man? . . . Get it down to the police laboratory quick! . . . No, no—forget about fingerprints! That candle contains a hollow chamber. It's filled with a deadly poison! Have your laboratory experts split it open, but be sure that they do it under a glass hood. It's devilish stuff!"

"Have you found the bearded guy?" Berrigan gasped.

"I've found him, but he isn't bearded. And you needn't worry about arresting him. He's been stabbed to death!"

Carrie hung up abruptly. She leafed through a Manhattan direc-

tory and found the address of the missing Harry Brentwood. It was a good address in a swanky neighborhood.

On the way uptown in the taxicab, Carrie answered Aleck's dazed question.

"The murderer of Mannix was probably taking no chances with his actor stooge. He gave Duncan a gas candle. It was meant to go off while Duncan was making his auto getaway. He'd have died instantly. But the traffic cop spoiled that by grabbing the red candle. So the killer had to strike with a knife! He planted another of his damnable candles to get us, too. He must have a whole flock of the horrible things!"

Carrie was staring alertly ahead as she talked. She halted the cab before it reached its destination. Brentwood's swanky apartment house was in the center of the block. Carrie and Aleck walked past the building's canopied entrance, but didn't go in. A trip around the block and a discreet sneak through a cellar and a rear yard got them inside the building without notice.

They waited until the rear-service elevator went up with a tradesman. Then they slipped quietly up the fire stairs. Carrie didn't know which floor Brentwood lived on, but there were name plates on all the kitchen doors.

Brentwood's service door was on the seventh floor.

Aleck got busy with a shining little implement. It wasn't easy to pick the lock quietly. He made several unpleasanlty loud clicks before he got the door open. But there was no blast of gunfire when Carrie and Aleck finally tiptoed into a dark kitchen.

Aleck began to suspect they were about to find another corpse!

But sounds from a distant bedroom changed his mind. Someone was moving noisily about. Bureau drawers were opening and closing with hurried bangs. It sounded like a desperately hasty search!

It wasn't though. The man who was making all the noise was Brentwood himself! Carrie recognized him from the description given by Harley Dixon, president of the bank. He was a thin, sharp-eyed young man with straw-colored hair. He had good taste in suits.

Brentwood was packing an extra suit in his traveling bag when Carrie and Aleck peered into the bedroom. The bag was already crammed to bursting. Brentwood's fingers trembled as he snapped the bag shut and pulled the straps tight. He had strong, powerful hands.

He straightened with a yelp of terror as Aleck sprang into the room.

CHAPTER V.

DEATH VAPOR.

Aleck swung and missed. It was remarkable how swiftly Brentwood dodged. He whirled like a cat. An outstretched foot sent Aleck tumbling. Brentwood rushed like a tornado at Carrie.

But Carrie played his own game. The fugitive bank teller took a header over her outstretched leg. As he fell, Carrie dived and grabbed. She had studied jujitsu from the best Japanese instructor in New York. But Brentwood was too cagy to be caught. He managed to roll aside and bound to his feet.

He almost reached the door before Aleck piled on him again. It turned into a rough-and-tumble battle.

Rough stuff at close quarters was Aleck's meat. There was a thud and a grunt. Another thud was followed by a whistling gasp from the fugi-

tive. He doubled up with a greenish face and no air in his lungs.

By the time he was able to breathe normally he was a helpless prisoner. Aleck pumped harsh questions at him.

"Why did you kill Louis Mannix at the bank?"

"I didn't."

"Where are those two thugs you hired as fake robbers?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"No? What about that packed suitcase? Were you planning to visit your favorite grandmother?"

Brentwood was deathly pale, but he managed to get a grip on himself. He admitted he had turned over his teller's window to the cashier. But that was only because he had a sick stomach. He had received permission to leave.

"From whom?"

"From Mannix."

"The dead cashier, eh? A man you know we can't question!"

Brentwood licked his lips. He had turned on his bedroom radio, he said. He had heard a news broadcast about the crime at the bank. He learned that the police were after him. It terrified him. He lost his head and decided to flee. That was all.

While Brentwood was talking, Carrie Cashin prowled around the room. She stared enigmatically at him when he finished.

"Do you know anything about red candles?"

"No."

"Then how do you explain this?"

Carrie lifted a pasteboard box out of a closet. It had been standing on the floor, covered with a pile of old newspapers. Inside the box were several thick red candles, exactly like the ones used by an unknown murderer.

"I don't know anything about them. They came by parcel post. I thought it was a joke. I shoved the box in the closet and covered it with newspapers. I forgot I had it."

Aleck counted the candles. There were ten of them.

"What did you do with the other two?"

"Ten is all that came."

"The box is stamped one dozen."

"I can't help what the box says."

Aleck took his penknife out of his pocket.

"Do you object if I split one of these candles open?"

Brentwood's jaw tightened. He swallowed convulsively, but he didn't say anything. Aleck looked a little pale himself. He withdrew the sharp point of his knife from the red wax without attempting to puncture it.

Carrie said abruptly, "Wait a minute!"

She picked up Brentwood's telephone. She called police headquarters and asked to be connected with the crime laboratory. Her lovely lips were a rigid line when she hung up.

"They've tested the candle the traffic cop grabbed," she declared. "It contained a hollow pocket filled with hydrocyanic acid."

"Good God!" Aleck gasped.

He had dabbled enough in chemistry to understand the meaning of Carrie's grim statement. Hydrocyanic acid was an unstable, volatile, colorless and extremely poisonous compound. It was formed by decomposing metallic cyanids with hydrochloric acid. On contact with air it became a deadly gas. One whiff of it would kill a human being instantly.

Aleck glanced toward Brent-

wood's bed. It was smooth and unrumpled. There was no sign of the bank teller's pajamas.

Brentwood's pale face flushed.

"I came home sick, but I didn't undress. I stretched out on the couch in my clothes."

"Let's go!" Carrie Cashin said abruptly. "Bring him along, Aleck!"

"Headquarters?"

"No. Back to the bank. I need one more bit of testimony to clinch this case. Then we'll be able to hand our man over to Inspector Berrigan."

Aleck had found a loaded gun in a drawer of Brentwood's bureau. It made a satisfactory substitute for the gun Aleck had lost during the noose attack at the rooming house. His pocket jutted menacingly on the swift trip to the bank.

Unfortunately for Carrie's plans, Inspector Berrigan had already left. There was no one there except Harley Dixon, the bank's president, and a couple of uniformed cops assigned to guard the premises.

Carrie questioned Dixon about Brentwood's social background and his present salary. Then she smiled.

"The case is solved! All that remains is to turn our man over to Inspector Berrigan. I'll need your testimony, Mr. Dixon."

Dixon agreed. The three left the bank with Brentwood pocketed between them. Aleck headed for their taxi at the curb. He didn't notice the slumped hackman until the last moment. Then Aleck yelled.

The hackman had been slugged over the head. He sagged unconscious and bleeding behind the wheel.

Aleck's yell was the signal for a murderous onslaught. Two men were crouched on the other side of the parked car. Both were masked. Their guns flamed.

Aleck forgot everything except Carrie's safety. His outflung arm sent her sprawling. Dixon fell headlong with her to the pavement. For an instant Aleck and Brentwood were helpless targets. But they remained unscathed. Not a single bullet from the thugs came near the bank teller.

Brentwood seized the opportunity to flee. But he didn't get very far. The snarl of gunfire had brought the two cops in the bank out on the run. One of them overtook Brentwood and began a terrific battle with him on the sidewalk. The other cop went into action against the masked thugs. He was helped by Aleck. Aleck yanked out his burrowed gun and darted around the rear of the parked taxi to flank the gunmen. The crossfire dropped one of them in a heap and sent the other racing desperately toward the corner. A police bullet drilled between his shoulder blades before he could make it.

When the masks were removed from their dead faces, the gunmen were revealed as two well-known underworld trigger men. Their bodies were left lying in the street. Brentwood was hustled back into the bank.

"Handcuffs!" Carrie gasped.

She grabbed a pair from the nearest cop. Carrie Cashin was dishevelled and dirty. Her clothing was a mess. But there was a triumphant crackle in her voice.

"The jig is up—Mr. Harley Dixon!"

Steel bracelets snapped tight on the wrists of the astounded bank president. He swayed back with a roar of rage. For an instant his manacled hands lifted as if to try to dash out Carrie's brains. But he relaxed quickly. Aleck's pointed gun muzzle had a lot to do with that!

"You must be mad," Dixon faltered.

Carrie didn't answer. She made a sudden grab. Dixon's inner pocket was bulging noticeably. From it Carrie Cashin jerked a long manila envelope that was crammed with official-looking documents. She showed her find to Aleck.

"Bonds," he said tonelessly. "Negotiable ones, the kind easily disposed of. Worth, at a fair guess, about a quarter of a million dollars. The motive why one greedy crook named Harley Dixon killed another greedy crook named Louis Mannix."

"The money is mine," Dixon snarled. "It came from my own safe-deposit box in the vault downstairs. It's property that belongs to my niece. She comes of age today. I was about to turn those bonds over to her. If you don't believe it, telephone my home and ask her."

"You probably owe her a quarter of a million," Carrie agreed, "but not *this* quarter million. Let me see your deposit-box key!"

Dixon fought viciously, but Carrie found what she wanted. It wasn't Dixon's key. It was the one Carrie had last seen on the body of the murdered Mannix. She had taken good care to remember the serial number.

"You pretended to visit your own deposit box," Carrie said, "but you opened Mannix's!"

"That's a lie."

"All right. Where's your own key?"

"I— Why I—"

"You were in such a desperate hurry to steal those bonds that you fotgot *your own key!* You couldn't have opened your own lock box, even if you had wanted to! An ordinary depositor couldn't have opened Mannix's, either, even with Mannix's key—the guard would have challenged him—but it was easy enough for *you*, the president of the bank."

Dixon's guilt was apparent in his despairing face. Carrie snatched at his slack hands and held them up to the light. She pointed to the faint particles of red wax under the fingernails of the handcuffed bank president.

"That's what I came back to the bank to make sure of. You mold candles for a hobby, don't you? That's how you got the idea of wiping out your hirelings. You gave a gas candle to Horace Duncan. You were going to kill the two fake holdup men as soon as you got the chance—but they got wise to you. That's why they tried to shoot you when you left the bank—and why they didn't aim at young Brentwood."

Carrie continued quietly.

"Brentwood was a fall guy. You mailed him the box of candles to make him look guilty. He played into your hands by losing his head and attempting to flee. But I suspected that you were the murderer of Mannix from the moment I first entered the bank."

"But, Carrie—how? How in the world—"

A new voice was speaking. Carrie swung around and saw the puzzled face of Inspector Berrigan. A swift phone call from one of the cops had brought Berrigan racing madly uptown from police headquarters. He had heard some of what Carrie said, but he was still mystified at her knowledge of Dixon's guilt right from the start.

"Simple," Carrie said. "The case had *so many* fantastic aspects, that I knew the holdup was a plant. Remember one thing, inspector! Nobody *saw* Mannix killed! The uniformed guard had been knocked on

the head. The customers had been herded downstairs out of sight. The bank employees had flung themselves in terror to the floor where they could see nothing."

"So what?"

"It made it easy for Dixon to kill Mannix. As his masked hirelings fled, Dixon fired through the teller's window. Then he fired a second shot at his own desk—and was crouched in fake fright behind the desk when help arrived."

"Why should he want to steal Mannix's money?"

"That's your job," Carrie said sweetly.

Berrigan took the hint. His methods were swift and somewhat primitive. But they brought quick results.

Dixon confessed that he had squandered his niece's estate. He needed a quarter of a million in a hurry to avoid exposure. So he gambled on the stock market on sure-thing tips from some of his wealthy customers. Dixon dared not use his own name; it would ruin him if his undercover gambling was discovered. So he made a deal with Mannix, who had secret market connections. Mannix got greedy at the end. He knew he had Dixon over a barrel. He kept the profits and told Dixon to go to hell.

"A routine case, in spite of some amusing angles," Carrie said quietly.

"I'll be damned!" Inspector Berrigan said.

He cupped her lovely little chin in his hand. She didn't look a day over seventeen.

"Not bad, kitten," Inspector Berrigan gulped. "I begin to think Aleck was smart to hire you as his stenographer."

Carrie dimpled.

One moment it was a scene that looked like an artist's painting—a beautiful girl, graceful body poised, ready to dive into the glistening pool below while hundreds of people watch at the charity bazaar. And then, the image of horror engraved on the beautiful face; the dive of the body; the splash—and the color of blood which stained the surface of the pool. This is only the beginning of

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NO PROFIT IN MURDER

A "Keyhole" Novelette

by ALAN HATHWAY

CHAPTER I.
MURDER WARNING.

There was no question that the hawk-nosed brown men murdered the mail carrier.

But it seemed to be quite without reason. There wasn't a registered letter or package in the carrier's bag.

The brown men wore dirty, nondescript caps. The lower parts of their faces were covered with handkerchiefs. The hawklike brown noses protruded above them.

Both men slammed lead from black automatics. The mail carrier slumped to the sidewalk in front of the Redwood City *Index*. One of the brown men snatched up the mailpouch. Then both killers ran.

It was unfortunate for their plans that the getaway car was parked quite a distance away. The street directly in front of the *Index* building had been blocked with newspaper trucks.

A man of incredible proportions raced after the killers. At first glance he looked like a fat man. He weighed all of three hundred pounds. The killer with the mailpouch laughed when he saw his pursuer. Then a bullet took off his hat.

The brown man stopped laughing and shrugged off the mailbag. He could run faster that way. He dived into the getaway car just as his huge pursuer reached the mailpouch. He thought that would slow up the big man.

It didn't. But the getaway car still managed to roar off into the traffic. The pursuer fired two parting shots at the fleeing car. The big man had pale, frosty eyes that seemed without any expression. He chewed absently on a match stick. Colby Lyman did that when he was puzzled. The slower he chewed the match stick, the faster he thought. He was puzzled now by several aspects of the murder.

Colby was a printer on the Redwood City *Index*. He was also a deputy sheriff. That didn't exactly give him a right to go through the mailpouch of the slain carrier. But he did it, anyway. The sack was now dirty and spotted. Colby noted that, then went through it swiftly. There was no registered mail. But he found two things that did interest him. They were letters addressed to the Keyhole. The Keyhole—the mysterious columnist of crime who was the enemy of grafters and killers: the unknown foe of criminals who would end their days in prisons or with swift justice from the Keyhole's quick guns!

Colby Lyman slid the missives into his pocket. Then he moved slowly back toward the *Index*. The Keyhole would get those letters—letters which apparently had cost a mail carrier his life!

Colby's frosty eyes glinted strangely as he strode to the building. A small crowd had gathered

The laboratory door burst under the terrific pressure!

around the body of the dead man. Colby's big frame stiffened suddenly as his hand touched the doorknob. His gaze settled on a frightened figure across the street—a girl not much more than twenty. She was a pretty girl, almost a beautiful one.

The girl's mouth was a startled circle of terror. One hand flew to her lips as if to stifle some outcry she didn't dare make. Then the girl fled. She made no effort to cross the street toward the dead mailman. One frightened cry escaped from her throat, then she was gone.

That face was familiar, was one

Colby Lyman should know. But the girl's identity escaped him. Somehow, he felt certain he would meet her again.

The huge printer left the elevator on the fourth floor of the *Index* building. He strode noiselessly down the deserted corridor. There were no offices on this floor, apparently no doors in the wall. But a flick of the man's pudgy finger sent a hidden panel swinging inward. Then Colby Lyman, linotype operator extraordinaire, stood in a queerly barren room.

There was a desk with a wire-linked stylus and a teletype setter. A phone was connected to a queer phonograph device. Otherwise, the room seemed to be vacant.

Colby Lyman sighed as he sank into the one huge armchair. This was the secret sanctum of the Keyhole. No one knew that Colby Lyman was the Keyhole. Not even Renwick Overton, the harried and nervous publisher of the paper, knew the identity of his feared columnist of crime. Overton merely got orders by phone or mail—or by an electrically controlled stylus in his office—from Harold Jenkins, Jr., the owner of the *Index*, to leave the Keyhole entirely alone.

The Keyhole pulled out the two letters from the slain mail carrier's pouch. One of them had to be a reason for murder.

The first one was signed "Garret Grant." The Keyhole knew of the man. He was curator of the International Museum of Antiques, an imposing exhibit financed by popular subscription. The missive read:

I have reason to believe that Dr. Ferdinand Francine, the ethnologist, was murdered. His colleague and successor, Dr. Cushing, agrees. And if there is anything believable in an old Inca superstition, Dr. Cushing may go the same way. I, myself, may not be immune.

Colby Lyman's gray eyes narrowed to slits. He remembered the death six months before of Dr. Francine. The scientist was supposed to have been a victim of heart trouble.

And now Dr. Cushing. The Keyhole had heard that he had made a new discovery that meant millions to someone. The columnist did not know what it was. Apparently no one but Cushing knew that. The queer, stooped, gray-haired inventor had not even patented his great secret. The Keyhole had once called on Cushing. The man was a scrawny misanthrope with a face that looked like a wise, aged monkey's. Cushing had told the Keyhole exactly nothing.

But the columnist knew something of the value of that invention. He knew that Harvey Milford, the huge, red-faced baron of the steel industry, had offered Cushing royalties of millions for his find. It had been rumored that the deal had been closed. Then some hitch had come. Milford, Cushing and Garret Grant were all old friends.

The Keyhole grunted softly. At any rate, he knew that Cushing's secret could well be a motive for murder—or for someone to kidnap Cushing to force the secret from his lips. What better cover-up for that could there be than to tie it up with an Inca superstition and a murder that might not have even been committed!

Absently, the Keyhole tore open the second letter he held.

It read:

We are all in danger. I cannot explain in a letter. But please see me when I call at your office in the morning.

It was signed Gloria Francine.

The Keyhole leaped to his feet. He remembered where he had seen the face of the beautiful girl outside the *Index* office! She was Gloria Francine, daughter of the scientist who had died. Her father had been Cushing's partner. Now she was Cushing's assistant!

Had Gloria come to warn him of murder? Or had her letter been merely a means to set up a reason for being on the scene of the crime? Had the killers had time to search the mailbag, they might have known which letter not to take with them.

Grimly, the Keyhole looked in the phone book. He dialed a number and waited. The operator came on. That phone, she informed him, was temporarily out of order.

The Keyhole pressed a button on the phonograph beside the telephone, and his own voice blared out at him. It was an ingenious device for recording calls in his absence.

"I will take a message for the Keyhole," his voice had informed the caller. Then came the voice of the caller. It was breathless, filled with apprehension.

"The Keyhole must see me," it urged. "I have sent him a letter. Since, I have learned more. Please ask him to call me. This is Garret Grant. My phone number is—"

The Keyhole snatched at a ticker tape attached to the recording. The tape time-stamped each incoming call. Garret Grant had phoned at 9:45 a. m. It was now just after ten.

In the fifteen minutes after the profitless murder of the mailman, Grant's phone had gone out of service. The Keyhole knew then that the wires had been cut! And that probably meant more murder was coming!

The Keyhole's bulk seemed a lie as he hurtled from the building and leaped into a huge twelve-cylinder machine. As he did, a narrow-faced thug stopped leaning on a lamp-post. He ran toward a phone booth in a corner cigar store.

CHAPTER II.

PIECES OF A PUZZLE.

The Keyhole stamped down on the floorboard of his powerful car. The motor purred as the speed indicator touched seventy-five. A police siren screamed from under the hood. Colby Lyman, as a deputy sheriff, had a legal right to that siren.

The heavy sedan careened as it took a corner at more than sixty miles an hour. Colby Lyman was grim. More murder had to be coming. Colby had known from the start that some phony set-up was involved in this thing.

He had known that the hawk-nosed brown men were stage props. He had known it because he had found brown grease paint on the mail carrier's pouch!

All the persons involved in this grim setting of murder might be in danger. It might be as Garret Grant had indicated. But no motive of Inca superstition or revenge was behind it! Colby had heard that an Inca curse followed Francine and all who should harbor him. That had been reported at the time of his death. It was supposed to be something like the curse of the tomb of King Tut.

Suddenly the Keyhole realized that his car was being followed. A heavy green sedan was making all the turns taken by Colby's big machine. Colby kept one eye on the rear-view mirror.

That was one reason he didn't see the second car at the crossing.

It was a crossing he had to make to reach the International Mu-

seum's annex, which was both home and office to Garret Grant. The second car was black. The driver judged the speed of Colby's machine and aimed his own machine like a torpedo.

At the same instant, the car pursuing the Keyhole opened up with a siren, to rivet the columnist's attention on the rear-view mirror. That made contact a simple matter for the man with the second machine. He set a hand throttle and leaped to the street. The black sedan shot out, directly in the path of Colby's speeding machine, which was now doing seventy-five.

There was a rending crash and a burst of flame. Colby Lyman would have been instantly killed if it hadn't been for the special weights in his car. Colby's machine weighed nearly two tons.

It plowed into the black car with a grinding and crunching of steel upon steel. The black car was hurled fifty feet sideways by the impact. Then both cars turned over, a still-twisting mass of junk. Gasoline spilled over hot manifolds. Red flame leaped into the still, autumn air. Black smoke poured from the wreckage.

The pursuing car ground to a halt. Hawk-nosed brown men leaped out and laughed. The driver who had been in the collision car joined them. He was a narrow-faced thug whose face was a pasty white. He laughed also.

The three got back in the car and drove off.

"If that's the right guy," he growled, "well, he just ain't any more. There ain't anybody in the world that could live through that."

"Yeah," muttered one of the phony brown men, "an' now we got another guy to put this 'curse' onto."

The tangled wreckage was pouring forth clouds of black smoke. It concealed the mass of twisted steel from the fleeing car of the thugs.

Their job had not been quite as complete as they thought. In any ordinary machine it would have been. But Colby's car had been built with such emergencies in mind. The top had a framework of steel that could withstand any blow. But a simple catch permitted any section of it to swing outward. It could not be used as a trap for its owner.

Even as the flames gathered speed, the Keyhole was getting set for a lunge toward freedom. But he held it until the last possible moment. He wanted the killers to think he was dead.

The street was deserted when the Keyhole crawled out. The section was one devoid of homes. Vacant lots spread out for many blocks. The Keyhole ran in the direction of the nearest busy intersection. He needed a taxicab to take him the rest of the way to Garret Grant's museum and home.

Garret Grant's home was a colonial edifice, the rear wall of which was part of the museum itself. Colby stamped up the steps and punched the bell. A liveried butler opened the door. Colby flashed his deputy's badge.

"The Keyhole, from the *Index*, sent me," Colby said. "He wants me to interview Mr. Grant."

The servant's eyes opened wide. He seemed surprised.

"W-why, Mr. Grant received a message from the Keyhole," he stammered. "Just a few minutes ago. It directed him to meet the Keyhole, at his office. The message came by hand, sir. Mr. Grant even showed it to me."

Colby Lyman's eyes hardened. If

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SHAD—B6

this was on the level, if Grant had not had the message sent to himself to cover something else—then Grant's life was in danger.

Colby turned slowly on the steps. "I've got to get to a phone," he muttered. "I've got to call the *Index* quick."

"Our listed phone is out of order," the butler told him. "But we have a private wire you can use."

Colby Lyman leaped inside. He got Renwick Overton, the publisher of the *Index* on the wire.

"I'm on a job for the Keyhole," he told Overton. "I got to find out if there's a guy there to see him."

Overton told him that there was a man there to see the Keyhole; a man who seemed scared to death. The man was Garret Grant. Overton said he would send for him and put him on the phone. Then the publisher of the *Index* blurted:

"If you can reach the Keyhole, tell him we have important news. Dr. Stephen Cushing, the inventor, has been kidnaped. We just got an inside tip a few moments ago."

"Never mind putting Grant on the wire," Colby Lyman rasped. "Call the police. Give him an armed guard and send him home. Tell him to wait for me in his office."

The Keyhole hung up. The butler told him that Grant had an extra car, which was in the garage. The Keyhole got the key, took the car and roared down the highway.

Dr. Cushing had been kidnaped. That completely killed the Inca superstition theory as far as the Keyhole was concerned. That was a front to hide guilt. Someone was after the secret invention that Cushing had hinted would rock the world.

Apparently Garret Grant was in the clear. He had established an alibi for himself by seeking an interview with the Keyhole. But—the Keyhole knew that paid kidnapers can do a job just as well without the master mind at hand.

The Keyhole thought of Harvey Milford, the steel tycoon; thought of the apparent impasse he and Cushing had come to in the terms of sale of that invention of the queer scientist. Milford was on record as extremely anxious to get control of that invention.

But there was one thing else that bothered the Keyhole. Where did Gloria Francine fit in this picture? If the girl were completely innocent in this strange plot, why had she not carried through her visit to the Keyhole after the murder of the mail carrier? Why was she so upset and afraid?

The Keyhole raced to the laboratory of Dr. Stephen Cushing.

CHAPTER III.

THE BLAST.

Gloria Francine's dark eyes were even wider than they had been earlier in the morning. She stood in a laboratory room that once had been a neat and orderly place of research and experiment. Now it was a shambles. Apparently, Dr. Cushing had sold his liberty dearly. Blood was spattered on the floor. Gloria Francine's face was as pale as a sheet of white wax. Her lips, without artificial aid, were a startling contrast in carmine.

"I was in my darkroom developing color-film strips for a guidebook," she explained. "I heard men stamp in. Then I was locked in the darkroom. There was some shooting, and I heard Dr. Cushing scream. Then they went out and I heard a car roar out of the driveway. After a while I managed to get the door open and call the police."

Colby Lyman said nothing for a

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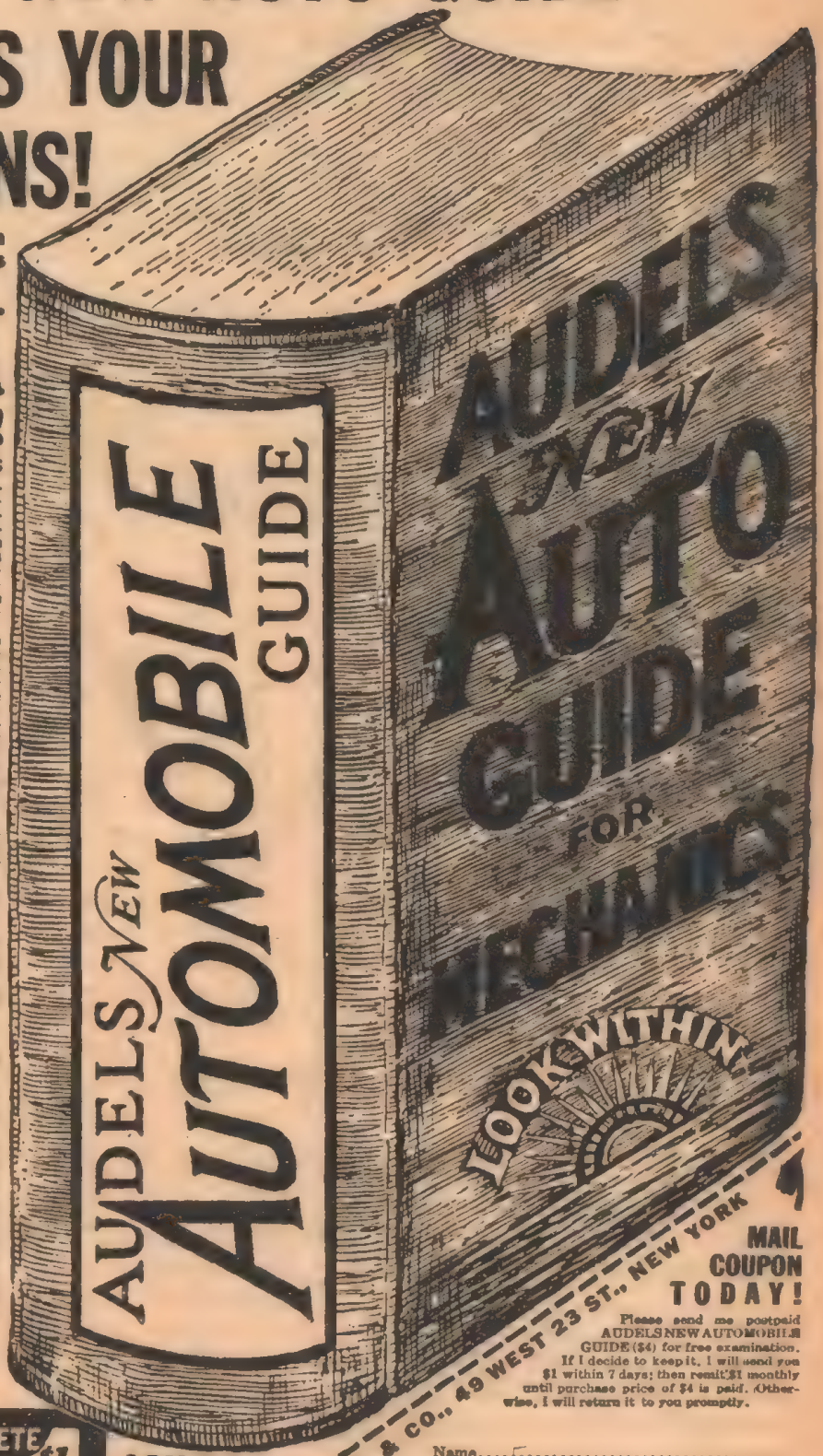

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MYS—7

moment. He examined every foot of the laboratory. There was no ransom note. There had been at least two men besides Stephen Cushing. Colby thought of the two phony brown men. His eyes were hard as he spoke to the girl.

"Did you believe your father was murdered?" he asked her.

"N-no, I didn't," Gloria replied. "Dad had a phobia that he was followed by an Inca curse. He once moved an old Inca idol in Peru that was supposed to cast a spell. I . . . I thought he was just getting old, imagining things. B-b-but—"

Gloria fumbled in her handbag, took out a crumbled paper. She handed it to Colby Lyman.

"Now, I'm not so sure," she whispered. "This is one of several notes that Dr. Cushing received. I was going to take it to the Keyhole this morning. But I saw two brown men commit a murder. By now they may know I wrote to the Keyhole."

Colby Lyman saw a thin sheet of India paper scrawled with queer hieroglyphics.

"It . . . it's a warning inscribed in Inca hieroglyphics," Gloria whispered. "It says my father was killed by an untraceable Inca poison. And it warns that all who harbored dad, all who were dear to him, will likewise die. Not many persons know the Inca tongue. And not many know dad's Inca background."

"Did your father have any money, or did he possess any secret that could have been worth murder?" Colby inquired.

"Dad had no money," the girl said simply. "And just before he died, he said he'd never developed anything worth a dime to him. He was working on something he was interested in. But it didn't mean any money. I know that."

"Is there any financial reason for kidnaping Dr. Cushing?"

"Some invention he has that I don't know about," Gloria said. "Harvey Milford wants it pretty bad. But I don't think Milford knows how to write Inca hieroglyphics."

"Come on," Colby said. "We're going to see Dr. Garret Grant."

The girl went out. Colby paused for a moment in the laboratory, and turned toward the door. It was closed. He had left it open. Suddenly, Colby Lyman realized that he was staggering slightly.

It was not until then that he smelled the gas. He lunged at the laboratory door. But the door was of solid oak. And Colby realized that he had put little strength into that plunge against it. Dimly he heard a shrill laugh. A voice spoke. It sounded as if the owner had filled his mouth with pebbles and then spoken through a hollow tube. "It is not my plan that you should interrupt Garret Grant right now. And, in any case, you seem to learn things too rapidly."

There was a scratching of feet on a gravel driveway. Then silence. Colby could not even tell whether the voice had been that of a man or a woman.

Colby Lyman felt consciousness slipping from him. He could not identify the gas by smell; could not be sure whether it was inflammable or not. He tried again to batter down the oaken door. Fully conscious, he would have plunged through it like a charging buffalo. His body had the ruggedness and strength, but now he could not use it.

Then he saw the storm door; an old one, but stout. It leaned against one wall.

Colby grinned tightly. If— It was the only gamble that he could

The bucket opened—and the Keyhole hurtled downward!

take. He had to take it.

It took all the strength the crime columnist could muster to drag the storm door up before the oaken laboratory exit. Colby wedged himself between the two wooden sections. Then he filled his lungs, tensed his muscles and braced himself for a mighty ordeal. One thumb spun the flint wheel of his cigarette lighter.

Whoooom!

The blast broke every window in the block. The laboratory door burst under the terrific pressure. Colby Lyman's huge body hurtled through the air, landed in a clump of bushes. Protected and cushioned somewhat by the even distribution of pressure made possible by the storm door, Colby's body was still a mass of bruises. Wedged like a sandwich-filling between the two wooden doors, he had been blown clear. Colby noticed that no fire had followed the blast.

A frightened, feminine squeal came to Colby's ears. Gloria Fran-

cine raced toward him across the yard. Both fear and amazement showed upon her face.

"I . . . I went out in the car and waited," she stammered. "W-what happened to you?"

Colby Lyman shook his head. If she was acting, she was doing a good job of it. He muttered something about an explosion, and let it go at that. Then he climbed into the car.

He tried to recall the disguised voice speaking through a tube. He wanted to satisfy himself as to whether it could have been a woman's. He couldn't.

A few minutes later, he pulled up in the driveway beside Garret Grant's home and office.

CHAPTER IV.

HELL ERUPTS.

Garret Grant was home this time. He was profuse in his thanks for Colby's telephoned insistence on a police escort. He hadn't seen any suspicious characters on his way back, he said, but they might have been there. The police left him after he arrived at home. He said he had been home for more than half an hour.

Colby Lyman made two mental notes. One was that Grant had ample time to get to Stephen Cushing's and back. And Grant undoubtedly knew about Inca hieroglyphics. In fact, he admitted that when Colby handed him the crumpled paper Gloria had given him.

"Yes," he said slowly. "It is very peculiar. Until these developments arose, I had put down Francine's fears as idle ones. Then Cushing showed me one of these. Now—I'm not so sure."

Colby Lyman bored cold gray eyes into Garret Grant.

"Kidnaping," he said shortly, "is not an Inca custom of revenge."

Garret Grant looked even more sad than ever.

"No," he said slowly. "You are right. So there is just one more thing I must tell you. It may mean much. Or it may mean nothing at all. I hope it doesn't."

Colby Lyman felt his muscles tighten. He felt that he might be getting to the heart of this thing at last. He knew the Inca theory was out of the window. Even though he had seen the hieroglyphics, he had also found brown grease paint on the slain mail carrier's letter pouch. "Go on," he said softly.

"Harvey Milford had agreed to buy Cushing's formula," he said. "Cushing had agreed to sell it to him. Then something went wrong. Milford nearly had apoplexy the last time I saw them together. He threatened Cushing with all sorts of things. I d-d-don't know—"

A pounding of feet on the outer steps and the jangling of the doorbell interrupted them. The butler opened the door and a human whirlwind stormed into the room.

The man was huge, red-faced, and bristling with excitement and anger. His beefy jaws fairly quivered as he talked. He kept running one hand through graying hair with a quick, nervous motion. Harvey Milford seemed about to burst with rage.

"Look at this!" he shouted. "I've got to do what they say. That formula of his is damned important to me."

Milford shoved a sheet of paper under the nose of Garret Grant. The curator of the museum blanched, handed the paper to Colby Lyman.

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tailed instructions later in the day. If you fail, he will die.

"Someone did this who knows how much I need him," Milford wailed. "His formula would revolutionize the steel industry. And he never even made a copy. He memorized it so no one could steal it."

He turned suddenly on Gloria Francine. "Go back to the laboratory," he stormed. "Search it and see if Cushing left any notes we could use to figure out that formula. Even after I pay the fifty thousand dollars, they might kill him."

Gloria Francine went out the door. Colby turned then to Milford, asked him what Cushing's invention was expected to do. Milford sat in an easy-chair. Garret Grant hunched down on a piano bench in another corner of the room. Milford began to speak slowly.

"Cushing has developed a formula for the quick hardening of steel," he explained. "It will so greatly simplify present methods that millions will be saved. He hasn't patented it yet, but I know it is based on the principle of—"

Colby leaped then. His finely attuned ears heard the faint *ping* of a silenced rifle. The tinkle of broken glass followed in the split fraction of a second. Colby leaped at Harvey Milford, bowled him over in a quick try to get him out of the line of fire of the bullet.

The Keyhole might as well have stayed where he was. The slug found its mark. But that wasn't Harvey Milford. There was a round black hole, like some strange bug, directly in the center of Garret Grant's forehead!

Milford said, "Well, I'll be—"

Then all hell erupted within the museum and office. An incendiary bomb let loose with a roaring blast. It was directly under the colonial living quarters of Garret Grant. The floor gave way, plunging Colby

Lyman into a flame-raging cellar. Colby had only one glimpse of Harvey Milford. The industrialist had stood back just as the blast came. He was standing by a large open window. The blast knocked him harmlessly into a big lilac bush. Colby Lyman wondered if that stance had been purely accidental.

The big printer fought his way through the raging cellar, found a door leading to the lawn. When he got outside, well smudged with soot and smoke, the entire place was a mass of flames.

The International Museum of Antiques was not of a too modern construction. It had been standing a long time and most of it was frame. It went up like a tinder box.

CHAPTER V.

THE KEYHOLE PREDICTS.

The Keyhole column of the *Index* that night had one odd paragraph:

> The payoff of a double murder is due within hours. It will really be something for the front pages when all of the dirty plot is told. I might mean one thing, and I might mean another. If the killer thinks I'm right, I might not be with you very long. Because your correspondent intends to be in on the finish.
>
> One stupid murder usually brings on another. At least one guy will know what I mean by that.
>
> 'Til death do us part,
>
> The Keyhole.

As the Keyhole wrote these lines, a diminutive Chinese stood beside him, fingertips buried in his sleeves. Ling Su's official title in life was valet to Harold Jenkins, Jr. Ling Su's father had been valet to the senior Harold Jenkins before that crime-crusading industrialist had been killed by gangsters.

Ling Su was the only man alive who knew that Harold Jenkins, Jr., owner of the *Index,* was both Colby Lyman and the Keyhole. Ling Su approved of the war on crime. But he did not approve of many of the chances that his employer insisted on taking.

"Your job today, Ling, is to keep Harvey Milford in sight at all times," the Keyhole told the little Chinese. "When he goes to pay that ransom, which he will, I want to know where it is. Then we'll have a payoff."

Darkness fell as the city gossiped about that strange paragraph. It was dark when the Keyhole got into action. That column paragraph was calculated to do at least one thing. It should hasten the killer to complete his scheduled plan.

The Keyhole thought he knew what that was. His first trip was to the half-demolished laboratory of Dr. Stephen Cushing. That was all dark now. The Keyhole went in using a tiny pencil flashlight. He saw that drawers had been cleaned out pretty well. Apparently, Gloria Francine had searched diligently for some notes that would lead her to Cushing's formula.

Then the Keyhole found the girl's photographic darkroom. Plates and proofs littered the floor. The Keyhole grinned slightly, picked them up. He found a dummy of the guidebook, well annotated. He grunted in satisfaction, slipped it in his pocket.

Then he drove rapidly toward the smoky, glaring steel mills at the outskirts of the city. Black slouch hat and flowing opera cape covered him as he walked. In that garb, the Keyhole had often been identified. It also served well in the dark.

The Keyhole found Harvey Milford's office without any difficulty. The office was dark and empty. With his pencil flash, the crime

hunter went through drawers and filing cabinets. Finally, he found one thing he sought—the private file of correspondence between Harvey Milford and Dr. Stephen Cushing.

In it he found Milford's offer of fifty thousand dollars cash and royalties that would have run into millions. The Keyhole remembered that fifty thousand dollars was the amount set for Dr. Cushing's ransom!

Then he found Cushing's refusal of that offer and a demand for five hundred thousand dollars in cash and smaller royalties. It seemed to be on that point that they had split. Other books told the Keyhole that business had not been as good for the Milford Rolling Mills as the public thought. Milford could not have met Cushing's demand for half a million dollars in cash!

The pattern was now pretty clear. At least the motive for murder. But he saw more when he studied more closely Harvey Milford's bank books. Then he grinned, slightly.

A late withdrawal that day was fifty thousand dollars in cash. But right after it, also in cash, was another. That was for ten thousand dollars. That, the Keyhole believed, was scheduled for a double-cross not quite on the schedule!

The Keyhole chuckled softly. In the darkness he phoned his sanctum on a private wire.

"Mr. Milford meet thugs on appointment," Ling Su's voice told him. "Then girl came up. Say she know all about murder. Thug grab her, clap hand over her mouth. Milford agrees to meet thugs later in the night. I catch address, so I then follow thugs and girl. They do not see me, so I sneak off to phone. The place is—"

A sharp, crackling noise like a fusillade of shots rattled over the telephone wires. There was an Oriental scream as Ling Su made one last effort to give the address. Colby Lyman raced from the building and toward the street.

He had to get back to his office right away. He had one device in his office that no one knew about. If they did, he would seldom get tips on crime from persons who were not in the clear themselves. An automatic device asked for a tracer on every call while it was being made and recorded that information. If the Keyhole could get back to the sanctum, he could find out from what spot Ling Su made his call.

From there, the Keyhole would be on his own.

The crime columnist strode rapidly through the lurid gloom of the rolling mills. Furnaces spat liquid steel into molds, their mouths yawning redly into the night. Hopper gondolas of ore clanked on the cable-fed railroad tracks. Switching engines puffed noisily. Ahead, a giant crane rumbled, its huge bucket transferring bites of ore from piles left by the railroad cars to the huge storage range in the darkness hundreds of feet away.

The Keyhole hurried past the cacophony of sound made by the various parts of the rolling mill, each rumbling or squealing in apparent disharmony with the others. The Keyhole's mind was on Gloria Francine. He had known for more than an hour now, that she was innocent of crime. Now he knew that he undoubtedly had to save her from death at the hands of a bitter and ruthless killer.

The Keyhole paid no attention to the rumble of the giant crane. That was a serious mistake.

The carriage high above burst into

unusual speed. The dangling bucket far below swung sharply. Then the operator let it drop, almost noiselessly, on well-oiled cables. The huge jaws yawned hungrily. It was too dark for the square-jawed bucket to cast a shadow.

The Keyhole was deep in thought. He didn't see the great ore bucket until it dropped squarely around him. Then there was a quick hum of high-powered motors. Steel cables whipped like clothesline in the wind. The giant jaws snapped shut. Cables accustomed to taking up a twenty-five-ton burden, snapped hungrily at the empty clamshell bucket, whipped it into the air like a tiny toy.

The Keyhole didn't have a chance. Before he could make a move toward freedom, he was high in the air above the ore piles. His clothing was caught tight in the teeth of the bucket's jaws. Then the bucket opened, sprung by the automatic trip. The Keyhole hurtled downward and the bucket went back on its course. The operator was smart enough to do his job without a break in routine. That way, no one would be the wiser.

Colby Lyman fell more than thirty feet onto a rough, slanting wall of iron ore. The impact knocked the wind from his lungs. Then he rolled to the bottom of the pile. Half a dozen thugs were waiting for him there.

All six of them jumped him at once. The Keyhole was still out of breath. He didn't have a chance.

"We figured you'd come here," one thug sneered. "If you had your chink shadow Milford, we figured this is where you'd come to do your checking up."

"Shut up, brainless," a narrow-faced killer spat. "We'll take him

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to the boss. Then he can do what he wants."

A covered truck backed up and Colby's trussed body was shoved in the back. A gag was stuffed into his mouth. Three thugs got in the front of the truck. One rode with Colby, just to see that he didn't try to work his bonds free. He looked big enough to handle that item with ease. The other two jumped into a sedan and roared on ahead.

The truck drove out into the night. The thugs had a gate pass to get out of the rolling mills.

CHAPTER VI.

KILLERS' MERCY.

When the truck stopped, Harvey Milford met the evil gang who rode it. The hulking guard in back kicked the opera-cloaked, black-hatted prisoner repeatedly. He muttered imprecations of hate and vengeance. When Milford looked in, the hulking one cackled an offer of free murder.

"I won't charge you a dime, boss," he husked. "It'll be a pleasure to rip out his gizzard."

Harvey Milford shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "Bring him."

Then Milford held a whispered conversation with the narrow-faced thug who seemed to be their leader. It was the same thug who had driven the black sedan which had crashed with the Keyhole's earlier in the day.

"Fifty thousand for the ransom," he mumbled. "And if you help me get the information I want, another ten. Then you can bump him, and there won't be any witnesses against you."

The procession marched by the pale beams of flashlights. The Keyhole's opera cloak and hat bobbed over the shoulder of the hulking man who had offered to murder him for nothing. Finally they came to a clearing at the edge of a cliff. A small campfire burned. Near the fire,

on a pallet of leaves, lay the wizened, monkeylike figure of Dr. Stephen Cushing. His little eyes glittered fiercely.

Tied to a tree at the edge of the clearing were two figures. One of them was the diminutive Ling Su. The other was Gloria Francine. Both were gagged. The girl's dark eyes flashed with anger as she saw Harvey Milford step into the flickering light of the fire.

Rat-face stepped forward, stood over the prone form of the little inventor. A twisted sneer was on the thug's lips.

"Yuh done murder today, wise guy," he snarled. "You're in this just as deep as we are, an' yuh can't squawk at nothing."

Dr. Stephen Cushing's eyes went wide with surprise. He tried to sit erect, found he couldn't. Then there was terror in his expression.

"Why . . . why, I'm really tied!" he gasped. Then he raged.

"You dirty double-crossers!" he stormed in his high-pitched voice, "I told you that you could have all of the fifty thousand. Isn't that enough for the little job you did?"

Rat-faced sneered and shook his head.

"We'd 'a' taken that, anyway," he snarled. "We know you're a crook. Yuh had yourself kidnaped and then killed a guy an' set fire to his place. Now, if we make yuh talk, we get ten grand more."

Rat-face spat into the fire.

"We'll get it," he opined, and pulled a small metal contrivance from his pocket. It was a thumbscrew. "Mr. Milford wants some dope yuh got," Rat-face finished. "Yuh know what it is, so give."

The thug stooped and fitted the thumbscrew over the nail of Cushing's right thumb. The little man went entirely hysterical. A brain that had schemed for years cracked under the strain of impending torture.

"I killed Grant today," he screamed. "I killed Francine six months ago to get that formula. I put him in an airtight room and withdrew all the oxygen. He suffocated. There was carbon dioxide in his blood. But that is normal with a heart attack and resultant suffocation. And I got his formula for the quick hardening of steel."

Rat-face twisted the thumbscrew. "Give," he rasped.

Stephen Cushing screamed in pain. But his mind still clung to a mania that had been with him too long to lose.

"I killed for that formula," he squealed fanatically. "I killed for it and it will die with me. No one can get it."

In that instant, a figure twisted from the tree on the other side of the clearing. Gloria Francine leaped from her bonds. A long knife gleamed in her hands. It was a Chinese knife. Ling Su had freed her with a knife he always carried concealed in his sleeve.

Gloria Francine was crying bitter tears of anguish.

"He killed my father who trusted him," she cried. "The beast! I will avenge it myself. Right now."

Hysterically, she flung herself toward the monkeylike figure of Stephen Cushing. Rat-face twisted quickly. An automatic leaped into his hand, leveled at the girl.

Several things happened in quick succession then. The hulking guard who had been guarding the cloaked figure sprang across the clearing. The big "guard" swept Rat-face aside with a paw like a trip hammer. The guard's cap came off in the scuffle, and the assembled thugs set up

a shout of fright.

They saw in that instant that the Keyhole had changed places with his guard back there in the truck. In the gloom they hadn't noticed the deception!

Also in that instant, Stephen Cushing managed to get free. He struggled to his feet, screaming oaths of hatred at the thugs he had employed in his phony kidnaping. As he scrambled upward, he dug out a small automatic from an inside pocket.

The little gun barked spitefully. Red pin pricks cut the night. And holes leaped into the features of the rat-faced thug. Other thugs fired over the heads of Rat-face, thudded into the body of Stephen Cushing.

Other thugs wheeled toward the diving figure of the Keyhole. The big crime columnist first swung the girl to safety behind a tree. Then he whirled, automatic in each hand. He answered slug for slug with the five thugs. His accuracy was too great. One thug went down, drilled between the eyes. A shoulder wound took another. The other three turned and ran. They forgot the topography of the hilltop. The path they chose went to the lip of the cliff. But it was dark, and they failed to stop there.

Meanwhile, Stephen Cushing had sunk to his knees. Then he rolled over on his back. Blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. He coughed once. Then his cackling laugh rose into the night.

It brought Harvey Milford erect. The steel tycoon had just frisked the dying form of Rat-face. Milford had his sixty thousand dollars back. He was no fool in matters of money. His hand shook as he heard the dying cackle of Cushing, the inventor.

"He, he, he!" Cushing cackled. "The secret goes with me. Cushing dies and the secret dies. Milford gets nothing. He, he—" It ended in a gurgle.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET FORMULA.

Impotent rage suffused Harvey Milford's ruddy face. Then he had another thought. He turned toward the spot where Gloria Francine was whispering low words into the ear of the Keyhole. The crime columnist untied Ling Su as he listened.

Milford coughed suggestively.

"After all," he said, "I've done nothing wrong that anyone could prove. Cushing admitted that he kidnaped himself and killed Garret Grant. And Miss Francine's father."

Milford brightened. "No," he decided. "I really haven't done anything wrong."

The Keyhole smiled faintly.

"How about paying ten thousand for torture?" he inquired mildly. "And then getting the ten thousand back."

Milford looked at the dead Rat-face and shrugged.

"It's a lie," he sneered. "That was all his idea. He can't deny it now."

Colby Lyman shrugged.

"I'm not concerned about that," he said. "Cushing got what was coming to him. Miss Francine found her father's diary. The explosion blew open a secret drawer that even Cushing didn't know about. Francine's diary contained the original formula and a clear indication that Cushing murdered him."

Harvey Milford's attitude changed suddenly.

"Sixty thousand dollars," he stammered. "Cash right now. And plenty of royalties. I'll play fair. That secret will revolutionize the industry. And I'll have it all to myself!"

Colby smiled at him bleakly.

"You never played fair in your life, Milford," he said flatly. "But fifty thousand will be enough. That's the initial payment you had offered to give Cushing. And Miss Francine does not want any royalties."

Milford stammered in his excitement. He counted out fifty thousand dollars from the bills he had retrieved from Rat-face. Gloria Francine tore part of a page from a diary she had in her handbag.

Milford scanned the figures.

"This is it! This is it!" he shouted. "It's the right formula."

Suddenly, Harvey Milford seemed to feel that someone was being too generous with him. And something bothered him, something that would have bothered him before, if greed had not overbalanced his sense of proportion.

"Cushing must have been crazy," he said hopefully. "He couldn't have had any reason for murdering Garret Grant and burning the museum."

Colby Lyman laughed.

"His motive for that forced him to stage the fake kidnaping," Colby explained. "Being kidnaped, he had an alibi for murder. His motive made him ask five hundred thousand dollars cash instead of fifty from you. Failing to get it, he had to kill Grant. Without that murder there wouldn't be any royalties. He couldn't let Grant talk to me until he had been 'kidnaped' so he could kill at just the right moment.

"When he trapped me in the laboratory, he had come back solely to burn a photographic guidebook of the museum that Gloria Francine was making. I have it locked now in a safe. It is the only actual record left now of everything that was in the museum. When she didn't burn it on her second trip back, I knew the girl was not guilty."

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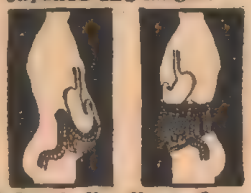

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Harvey Milford shook his head. He didn't understand. But his expression showed plainly that he didn't think he'd like it when he found out. Colby Lyman read from the other torn half of the page in the diary.

I must tell Stephen tonight that the invention, while a great boon to mankind, is worthless to us. It is not patentable because the principle is as old as the hills. The Chinese have used it. And so have the Hindus. It is merely revived and unearthed from lore that has long been forgotten. There is an exhibit in the museum that will show this. There have been dozens of cases in which ideas used by ancients have made modern inventions unpatentable.

"The date," Colby said slowly, "is May 3rd. On that night Ferdinand Francine met his death. It was not until later that Cushing discovered his error. Then he had to kill Grant, who knew of the exhibit, and burn the museum. Until then, he did not dare patent his 'find.'"

Milford's lips twisted into a snarl of frustrated rage. Without a clear patent he knew his business was ruined. Surreptitiously, he snaked a heavy automatic from his pocket. Then he whipped it up to firing position.

"Dead," he snarled, "neither of you can bear witness to that guidebook."

Milford stiffened then as he felt sharp steel dig into his back right by the heart.

"No, please," Ling Su's sing-song voice whispered. "Two more murder mean three more murder. Still nobody profit. What is use?"

With a snarl of disgust, Harvey Milford dropped his gun and plunged into the night. Colby Lyman spoke softly to still an already uttered protest.

"The money is yours," he insisted. "It is little enough penalty for Milford to pay. And you were the one whom these crimes have injured. I insist."

SHOULDER TO SHOULDER

by JACK STORM

Mike Flynn was fighting for the law—and a dead pal!

Young Mike Flynn, less than one year a patrolman, sent the radio car around the corner into Amity Street and checked the dashboard clock to see if it was time for a duty call. Beside him sat Sergeant Jack Ellis, white-haired, big-faced and grim. Ellis was an outstanding-looking man, for his clipped mustache and his eyebrows were a jet-black against the snowy whiteness of his hair.

"You believe in ghosts or hunches, Mike?" Ellis asked without looking at his driver.

Flynn laughed. "Not me. I'm Irish, but not superstitious. You worried about something, sarge?"

"I got me a hunch," Ellis said slowly. "I don't think I'm going to see another dawn. No—don't laugh yet. Tomorrow night you can do the laughing, and if I'm here, I'll join you."

"It's that mince pie we picked up at Greasy Joe's," Flynn chuckled. "Does things to you. Forget about dying, sarge. You're healthy as a horse."

"Sure—but one little chunk of lead could change that, Mike. Change it fast. But cops are paid to expect those things. We put on a uniform and a badge. From then on we're more or less fair prey for killers. But so long as we're standing on our feet, Mike, we fight together—shoulder to shoulder. That little badge means something—"

There was an interruption from the loud-speaker beneath the dash. Curt orders told of an emergency call from a jewelry store not two blocks away. Flynn stepped on the gas pedal hard, but he didn't snap on the siren switch. Sergeant Ellis jerked his gun out of its holster. As the radio car whipped around the corner, they were in time to see four men emerge from the store. A burglar-alarm bell was clanging furiously. Two of the bandits faced the street, guns leveled, threatening a handful of pedestrians who were attracted by the bell. Another thug was backing out of the store and mouthing curses. Flynn could hear him.

"Touch off the alarm, huh? When I said that was sure death, you did it anyhow, huh? Well, I meant what I said."

The gun in the bandit's hand jerked twice and someone groaned within the store. Then a fifth bandit emerged, holding a pretty girl before him as a shield. Before Flynn rolled to a stop, Sergeant Ellis was out of the car and running forward. His service pistol barked twice. Two of the bandits turned quickly and their guns spoke in unison. Sergeant Ellis was running fast and his own momentum kept him going. Certainly it wasn't his stamina, for that had all gone out of him when one bullet drilled his heart and the other his head. He leaned forward farther and farther until muscles and nerves refused to go on any longer. Ellis pitched flat on his face, skidded across the sidewalk a foot or two, and then lay very still.

Flynn was shooting, coolly and deliberately. He refused to allow himself to think of what had happened to Ellis. But Flynn was one man against six. The answering fire kept him from charging forward. Sergeant Ellis lay ominously still. Flynn gave a choked sob, dodged from one parked car to another, until he was close to where Ellis lay.

By this time the bandits were hastily climbing into their already moving car. There was no sign of the pretty girl they had apparently used as a shield or hostage, and Flynn guessed that she was inside the car also.

As the bandits pulled away, Flynn started shooting, but he was forced to aim low for fear of hitting the girl. He mechanically noted the numbers of the car before he rushed over to where Ellis lay. He raised the sergeant's head, closed his eyes and turned away quickly. One of

those slugs had smashed squarely through Ellis' face.

Flynn laid the dead man's head down gently, arose and ran toward the radio car, stuffing fresh cartridges into his gun on the way. He vaulted into the seat, turned on the siren switch and tore between the stalled traffic in pursuit of the killer car. He picked it up, three blocks north, and with grim satisfaction noted that his own fast cruiser was rapidly gaining on it. Holding his service pistol with his left hand, he shoved the weapon out of the window, rested his forearm against the car door and began firing. He saw one slug hit a fender and he carefully swung his gun a fraction to the left and just a trifle lower. If he could perforate the gas tank, he'd have them.

Suddenly the rear window of the car was smashed and two automatics shoved through the aperture. They blazed away. The windshield to Flynn's left cobwebbed. Other slugs hit the radiator and the hood. But Flynn's foot remained heavy on the accelerator, for there was a concentrated hatred in his heart for these murderers.

Then the bandits showed their true colors. Rats they were, and they lived by a rat's code. One of them shoved the girl's head up until it was framed in the window, flanked by the two spitting automatics.

Flynn gulped. He couldn't risk hitting her. That she would probably be murdered in cold blood later on, was evident, but still there was a chance, and Flynn didn't want to damage it.

The automatics began barking as the bandits pulled trigger as fast as they could. The girl's face was perfectly white. The ejected shells from the gunner on her left were hitting her cheek.

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against the bulletproof windshield directly in front of Flynn's eyes. All vision of the road and the bandits' car was lost. He transferred his foot from the gas pedal to the brake, but too late. The cruiser veered crazily, shot across the road out of control and smashed against a parked car. Flynn was thrown forward violently. The wheel smacked his stomach, the shattered windshield his skull. With a soft sigh he let go of his service pistol and draped himself over the wheel.

Someone was trying to pull him out when he awakened. His reeling senses steadied themselves quickly and he slid from behind the wheel under his own steam. He picked up his gun, stuffed it into his holster and commandeered a car. Two minutes later he was beside Sergeant Ellis again. Only now the body had been decently covered and a squad of patrolmen stood around waiting for the arrival of the medical examiner.

Flynn stepped up to Lieutenant Brady and saluted briskly. "There were six of them, sir. They got away in a car—probably stolen. They took a girl with them as hostage."

"Yes—I know," Brady said sadly. "And they got Ellis. Poor guy, he always did have a hunch that this would happen to him. Ellis played hunches. He believed in a lot of stuff that would make you and I laugh."

Flynn nodded. "Just before this happened, he told me he had a hunch he wouldn't see another dawn. He talked about ghosts, too—as if he expected to be one himself. Lieutenant, my tour of duty will be over in less than an hour. How about letting me see what I can do on this case? Ellis was my friend."

Brady shrugged. "There'll be a

gang of homicide squad dicks working on it before you even get out of uniform. But I won't stop you, Flynn. You're an officer, and that nickel-plated badge carries just as much weight as the gold ones that the homicide boys flash. Just don't stick your neck out too far. Those babies were killers and they were all masked, which indicates their mugs are probably well known."

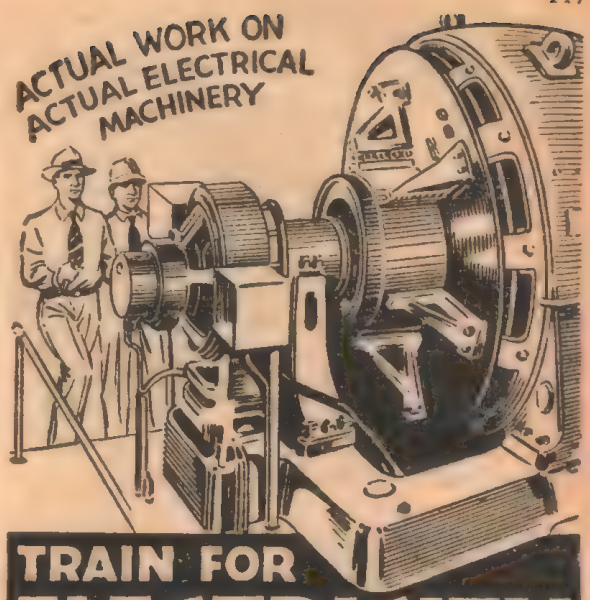
Flynn moved away, casting a last, lingering look at the shrouded corpse of Sergeant Ellis. At least Ellis would know now if there were such things as ghosts. He'd solved that riddle with the help of two crushing murder slugs.

Flynn elbowed his way through the crowd and entered the jewelry store. It was a lavish place, and very well stocked. There was nothing unusual in its remaining open until nearly midnight. Most of the stores in this neighborhood remained open until that hour. Flynn sought out the manager.

"I don't know what they looked like," the manager answered Flynn's query. "They were all masked. Helen—Helen Dane—that's the girl they took with them as a hostage, tried to stop them. That kid had nerve. But one of those killers just wrapped an arm around her throat and almost strangled her. They killed Peterson because he pulled an alarm switch. About a hundred thousand in uncut diamonds are missing. That's all they took."

Flynn whistled softly. "They certainly knew what they were after. About this girl now—she been with you very long? Have any friends among your employees? Good friends, I mean."

The manager shrugged. "Maybe—I don't know. Say—you ain't insinuating she was in on the crime? Copper, I know that girl. She wouldn't do a thing like that. Not Helen! Her heart was in the right



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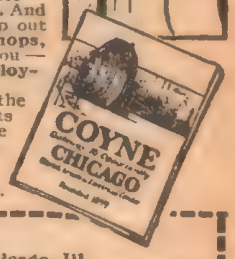

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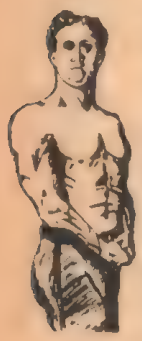

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place. She was always trying to do guys a favor—like Tony Wessell, for instance. I let him go because the kid was a born gambler and we don't like fellows of that kind in the jewelry business. She tried a dozen times to have me take him back."

Flynn made a mental note of that name, and before he left the store, he secured Wessell's address from one of the clerks. No use letting the manager know he was interested in a discharged employee. He might mention it to the homicide boys and Flynn wanted to handle this alone. It had occurred to him that there must have been inside help or how did those bandits know exactly when all those uncut, easily disposable diamonds would be in the store? Then, too, why had they taken Helen Dane as a hostage? They needed no hostage on their getaway. She would only impede a swift escape. Patrolman Michael Flynn was no detective, but he was no fool, either.

He hailed a taxi outside and had himself driven to the address which Wessell had filed. The discharged clerk lived there, all right, and the address was a rather swanky apartment house, rather above the level which a clerk could afford.

Flynn got the apartment number from the mailbox, tapped on the door, and when he received no reply, he examined the lock. It was a modern one and wouldn't give way to the motley keys he carried. Flynn walked down the corridor to a maid's small supply closet, found the door open and stepped inside. He could watch from that point.

An hour passed, and he wondered if he was an utter fool. He had derided the way Ellis played hunches, and now he was playing one on his own. Then the elevator doors parted and a dark-haired young man swaggered out. He walked slowly toward Wessell's

apartment, but the moment that the elevator doors closed he threw off that blanket of carelessness. He peered over his shoulder, hunched himself slightly, and before he applied his key to the lock he pressed an ear against the panels, listening to find out if anyone was inside.

He had the door open and was ready to enter when the cold muzzle of a revolver touched the back of his neck.

"Just walk in," Flynn said softly. "Make so much as a twitch of your muscles and I'll blow your head off. Move!"

Wessell moved, and once inside the apartment he became a quaking shell of a man. Flynn shoved him into a chair, stepped back a pace and kept him covered with his service pistol.

"All right," Flynn snapped, "where is the mob hiding out? Don't stall or lie. You and those rats killed a cop tonight. Cop killers get short shrift so far as I'm concerned. You'll talk, or I'll plant a slug between your eyes—just like one of your mob killed Sergeant Ellis."

"Y-you can't do that," Wessell quavered. "I . . . I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know—"

"Shut up," Flynn snapped. "Helen Dane was sweet on you. She knew all your little mannerisms. Even if you were masked, she'd have recognized you—and she did. That's why she was throttled—so she wouldn't be able to yell out your name. That's why she was taken prisoner. You knew those gems would be there tonight. You're the finger man, Wessell, but you'll be a dead one if you don't talk!"

Wessell's face showed that Flynn had struck home. He slumped deep in the chair. His chin wabbled; his hands shook badly.

"If . . . if I tell, will you promise they won't send me to the chair? Promise?"

"I'll promise nothing," Flynn stormed. "You were one of that mob. You're a cop killer and you helped murder one of the clerks at the store. Maybe he recognized you, too. You're no better than the rest of your fellow rats, but sometimes the D. A. goes easy on a songbird—so sing if you want to."

"You've got to promise," Wessell half shrieked. "You've got to! I . . . I didn't think there'd be any shooting. They swore it would be pulled off like a charm. But you've got to promise I don't get the chair or I won't talk."

Flynn leaned over and grabbed the sweating finger man by the collar. He shook him savagely.

"Listen, you yellow heel—they'll kill that girl! Murder her, understand? There'll be more blood on your miserable head. She liked you—she was your friend. Doesn't that mean anything, or are you just a hardened cop killer who doesn't give a damn how many people die so long as your skin isn't perforated with bullets? Well, it's going to be—quick! Now—where is that mob hiding out, and who are they? You have one minute, Wessell. You can spend it praying, but I doubt you'll be heard unless hell has its ears open. Or you can talk. Your choice, Wessell and—one minute!"

Flynn's gun centered on Wessell's head. His finger slowly pulled the trigger and the gun hammer went back. Flynn knew his gun, knew just how far he could work that mechanism. But Wessell didn't. He gave a shriek of terror and covered his face.

"I'll talk! I'll talk! It's a mob

headed by Nick Prince. They're all wanted men and killers. They made me do this. They would have killed me if I didn't help them. They . . . they took Helen, just like you said, because she recognized me by a wrist watch I was wearing. She gave me the watch last Christmas. They . . . they promised they wouldn't hurt her. I made them promise."

"Where," Flynn barked, "are they holed up?"

"In an old house at the end of Carmody Street. It's the only place for about half a mile around. Don't tell them I talked. Be sure not to tell them—"

Flynn transferred his gun to his left hand as Wessell's voice became a whine. He doubled his right hand into a mighty fist and administered a long, looping punch. It connected with Wessell's chin, sent his head back with a snap and glazed his eyes.

Flynn handcuffed the man, tied his legs and then gagged him. He took a small, cheap pistol from Wessell's pocket, threw it under one of the davenport cushions and then carried his prisoner to a small clothes closet. He dumped him inside and locked the door. Then he left the apartment quietly, so that no one might spot the uniform and wonder what a lone copper was doing here at this hour of the morning.

He took a taxi to within half a dozen blocks of Carmody Street, dismissed it and hiked the rest of the way. He knew that he should have called for help, but it was too late now. He couldn't afford to waste a second, for those killers might decide that Wessell would crack and change their address in a hurry.

Someone hailed him. It was another patrolman, approaching with his nightstick swinging from one hand. Flynn grinned. He'd have one man to help, anyway. He told the patrolman of what he intended to do.

"O. K.," came the prompt reply. "Count me in, Flynn. I knew Sarge Ellis—a nice guy. Two of us ought to be able to take those rats, if we surprise 'em. Let's go."

They crept down Carmody Street, took to the spacious fields that surrounded the last house and approached it from the rear. Flynn eyed the place speculatively.

"A perfect hide-out. We'll go in together—shooting. Remember, these muggs won't mind rubbing out a couple of more lives. Our job is to shoot first—and fast. We'll see if we can reach the cellar without arousing them."

They crawled forward on their bellies, crossed the cleared space at the back of the house, and lay breathing heavily, beside one of the cellar windows. Flynn took a knife from his pocket and briskly attacked the hard, weather-worn putty that held the pane of glass in place. With barely a sound he worked the pane of glass loose, reached in and unlocked the window. Then he slipped into the cellar. The other patrolman followed.

"Just in case," Flynn's aid whispered, "you want to make a report and I'm not able to, my name is Carey."

Flynn tapped him softly on the shoulder and grinned. They drew their guns, tiptoed up the cellar steps and tested the door. It wasn't locked. Flynn opened it a crack and yellow light filtered down to meet him. He took a quick look into the hall.

"A regular Maginot Line," he told Carey in a whisper. "The windows

are blocked out by steel shutters that can't be seen from outside. Once we're in, there's no getting out again. Ready?"

Carey nodded. Flynn stepped into the hallway, gun ready for action. He put his back against the wall and side-stepped toward one of the rooms from which light streamed. He heard someone whistling softly, and he signaled Carey to get set. Flynn gave a dive through the door. There were three men in the room. All went for their guns, but Flynn opened fire.

One of the men doubled up, clawing at his chest as he went down. Another was hurled against the wall by the force of the .38 bullet that burned through his shoulder. Carey started shooting, too. The third man snapped a shot, missed, and before he could shoot again, Flynn was upon him. He brought down the muzzle of his service pistol, raked it across the killer's forehead and sent blood coursing down into his eyes. Then he reversed the gun and cracked the killer's skull with the butt.

"Three down," he said without turning around. "Two to go!"

"Yeah," a snarling voice said from behind him. "Two to go. Let's see you start, copper!"

Flynn turned slowly. He recognized the man who had him covered with a big automatic. It was Nick Prince, a man with a price on his head. Flynn eyed him steadily. He held his own gun reversed, and he couldn't shoot before Prince would open up. It looked like the finish. He could see Carey's feet sticking around the doorway. Apparently Prince had stalked him and struck before Carey could utter a warning.

"So Wessell spoke his piece, huh?" Prince snarled. "We'll attend to him later. Right now your

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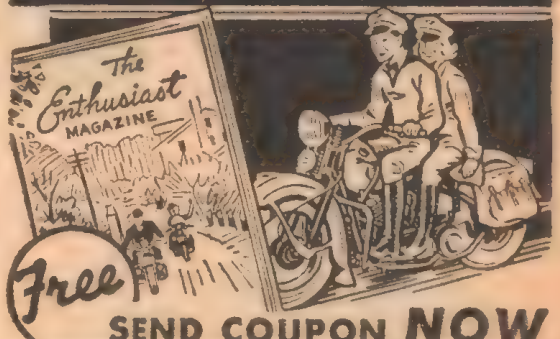

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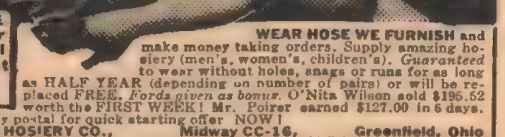

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number is up, copper. You're the dirty little punk who was with that gray-haired sergeant. Which makes it all the more pleasant, because we figured you almost had us. Here she comes, copper!"

Flynn's right hand hung at his side, still clutching the gun by the barrel. Suddenly he flipped it up and out. Prince jumped aside to avoid the missile, which would have missed by a yard anyway. Flynn aimed his own body somewhat better. In the wake of the hurtling gun, he rushed forward. Prince fired twice. One bullet ripped across Flynn's temple, but something kept him going. He could feel blood roll down his face. He must look something like Sarge Ellis by now—all bloody. Prince seemed to think so, too. He lost his nerve. This copper should have been stopped by that slug, but like Ellis he kept on coming. Prince gave a wild yell and retreated to the stairway. He charged up it, shooting as he ran.

Flynn wiped his eyes dry of blood, spotted his revolver on the floor and scooped it up. But Prince had vanished when he finally gripped the weapon and reeled toward the stairs.

"Listen, copper," Prince shouted from upstairs. "We got the dame here—me and one of my pals. If you fire one shot, we'll put a couple of slugs through her skull. That's a warning!"

Flynn paid no attention to the killer. He knelt beside Carey for a moment, found that he was breathing and his pulse was fair. The thug who had slugged him used considerable force behind the blow and Flynn guessed that Carey had a fractured skull. He still held his service pistol in a tight grip, as though he could use it again if necessary. But Carey would be out for many minutes yet. From now on Flynn was on his own.

He started up the stairway very slowly, very deliberately, gun thrust forward. Prince called out another warning.

"Stop where you are, copper, or I'll drill the dame. I swear I'll kill her if you don't stop."

"Listen, Nick," Flynn said aloud. "I'm coming after you. If the girl is hurt, I'll kill you myself and you'll wish you'd waited for the chair. Furthermore it won't be me who will kill you. It will be Sergeant Ellis. You're cooked, Nick. This is the end of the line for you."

But as he spoke, Flynn slowed up. How could he risk shooting it out with Prince when the murderer's first shot would rip through Helen Dane's head? Flynn didn't mind risking his own life—he was paid to do that. But the girl—she was so young and pretty. She had a right to live. Yet how could that be accomplished?

Suddenly Flynn heard a scuffle of feet across the floor of the room where Prince was hidden. A man—not Prince, for he was much taller and thinner—dived into the corridor and started shooting. Flynn's gun banged only once and then the hammer clicked metallically. His gun was empty!

The thug had jumped back into the room at Flynn's one and only shot and Flynn himself had reached the top of the stairs and was part way down the corridor. But the clicks of the empty gun had rung out almost as loudly as the shot. Prince gave a shout of elation.

"His gun is unloaded! Let's get him before he can fill her up again."

Flynn sucked in a huge gulp of air. It would probably be his last breath. He backed up a step or two. Something seemed to touch his arm and he shook it off impatiently. It happened again and he glanced out of the corner of his eyes.

"Carey," he said softly. "It's you. Boy, you woke in time to—"

Then Flynn's words clipped off. There was a blue-uniformed arm beside his own, but it bore chevrons—the rank of a sergeant. And the arm seemed to be covered with a halo of faint light. Flynn forgot that death awaited him with only seconds to spare. He turned his head and looked squarely at the figure beside him. His eyes grew wide and round. He exhaled with a wheezing sort of gasp.

The man beside him had no face. It had been torn away by a bullet. He wore the full uniform of a police sergeant and his hair was gray, his mustache and eyebrows jet-black—what was left of them, anyway.

"Sergeant Ellis!" Flynn hissed. "Ellis!"

A gentle voice buzzed in his ears. It seemed to come from nowhere and yet everywhere. It was Sergeant Ellis' voice all right. Flynn had no doubts about that.

"Carry on, Mike," it said. "Shoulder to shoulder—cops are paid to die. We're not afraid."

"No . . . no!" Flynn cried. "We're not afraid to die."

And he wondered if Prince and his aid had already opened fire and that somehow he hadn't felt the killing bullets as they burned into his body. Ellis was here, but Ellis was also dead. Then Flynn must be dead, too.

A pair of shadows moved into the corridor—Nick Prince and his gangling gunman. Both gripped guns and were approaching Flynn slowly, as if to draw out the agony of the man they intended to kill.

"Your gun is empty," Prince boasted. "This time you won't throw it in my face. I—" Prince

stopped and his jaw hung slackly. His voice became crammed with terror. "No! No! Sarge—no! You're dead!"

Beside Flynn the halo-enveloped arm jerked forward and a gun blazed. It kept on pumping slugs—dozens of them. But when Flynn looked at the spitting gun, he realized he could see through it. He averted his gaze, looked back at Prince and his gunman. Both of them had jerked erect. Both had dropped their weapons and were clawing at their throats. Then, very slowly, their knees buckled and they slid down to the floor. Agonized eyes peered up—not at Flynn. They didn't see him. They looked beyond him—at something that made their dying seconds, prolonged hours of horror. It showed in their eyes; on their faces.

Below, someone banged on a door. The butt of a pistol rapped against the steel panels. Flynn looked around. He was alone. He raced down the steps, hearing voices call an order to open up in the name of the law. He slid back the bolts. A horde of police barged in. Lieutenant Brady spotted him, took Flynn's arm and led him to a chair.

"Never mind me," Flynn said. "There's a girl upstairs—the one they snatched. See if she's all right. Watch out for Nick Prince and his hood lying on the floor in the hall. They may not be dead. I . . . I don't see how they could be dead. My gun was empty when they came for me. But they went down—as if they were riddled with slugs. I . . . I can't explain. I . . . I don't feel so good. I—"

Flynn slumped sideways and Lieutenant Brady barely caught him. He was transferred to a davenport. Someone forced a few drops of brandy between his lips and the fiery stimulant snapped him out of it.

"Are . . . are they dead?" he asked. "Prince and that hood, I mean?"

Brady nodded. "Stone-dead, Flynn. We found Wessell. One of the homicide boys got the same hunch you did, I guess. Wessell told us you had gone out alone, so we came as fast as we could. This was one swell job you and Patrolman Carey did. He's still unconscious, still holding onto his gun. We can't make him let go. But the doc says he'll be all right."

Flynn sat up and touched his bandaged temples. "How . . . how did Nick Prince and the other rat die? How many bullets were in their rotten hides? I . . . I can't understand what happened. My gun was empty. They heard it clicking on empty cartridges. That's why they came out of the room after me."

Brady sat down on the edge of a table. "Flynn," he said slowly, "I wish I could answer that question. I figure it this way. You must have looked pretty bad with your face covered by blood. Nick Prince and that hood of his didn't die from bullet wounds. They—dropped dead—of heart failure. The doc says by the look on their faces, they must have seen a ghost—maybe their past caught up with them, eh? And you must have been wrong about your gun being empty. I think you opened up and scared these so-called tough babies to death. What else could it be, Flynn? You got any suggestions?"

Flynn waved his head slowly from side to side. "Not me, lieutenant. I . . . I guess I was in a fog all right. Maybe my gun wasn't empty—like you just said. Maybe it was, and I got Carey's pistol without

even knowing it. But you said he was holding his gun so tight the doc couldn't pry it out of his hand."

Brady put a friendly hand on Flynn's shoulder. "Forget it. That bullet crease on your skull probably made you see or do things you can't remember. Sure—that's it. Come on—I'll help you to a car. There's sergeant's stripes in this for you, Flynn. Ellis' death leaves a vacancy, and I'm sure you'll fill it."

"Sergeant's stripes," Flynn said very softly. "Yes . . . yes, of course, lieutenant. I'll be proud to wear 'em. Maybe I could get the ones Ellis wore. But I could never fill his shoes—not the way he did."

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Help Wanted—Instructions

M. M. EARNED $267, three weeks, raising mushrooms in cellar! Exceptional, but your cellar, shed perhaps suitable. We buy crops. Book free. United, 3848 Lincoln Ave., Dept. 534, Chicago.

SERVICE—Anything you want done (my locality); business or other matters. Seaman, 3814 Meramec, St. Louis.

Old Gold & Money Wanted

GOLD—$35 OUNCE. Ship old gold teeth, crowns, jewelry, watches—receive cash by return mail. Satisfaction Guaranteed. Free information. Paramount Gold Refining Co., 1500-G Hennepin, Minneapolis, Minn.

OLD MONEY WANTED. Will pay $100.00 for 1894 Dime, S. Mint., $50.00 for 1913 Liberty Head Nickel (not Buffalo). Big premiums paid for all rare coins. Send 4c for Large Coin Folder. May mean much profit to you. B. Max Mehl, 440 Mehl Bldg., Fort Worth, Texas.

Miscellaneous

SWORDS, DAGGERS, rapiers, pistols, armor, curios. Catalog 10c. Robert Abels, M-860 Lexington Avenue, New York.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Continued from page 6

Incidentally, we like the impression of fear that he has given the four men on the cover. It is pretty hard to get exactly the right tone in things of this sort, but we feel that our cover certainly has it.

Maxwell Grant, who gives us the Norgil stories in our magazine, and also The Shadow novels in *The Shadow*, another Street & Smith publication, is an accomplished magician on his own, and knows all the tricks. Whenever he comes to New York to arrange his working schedule for the next month or so, he spends a good deal of his time in several of the magic shops around Times Square, as well as with other magicians who are either showing or resting in the city at the time. When we have a few moments to spare, we run out to lunch with him somewhere, knowing that half a dozen magicians will be enjoying a busman's holiday by showing their tricks to each other. They've all learned, by now, that their secrets are quite safe with us. A lot of times we figure we know just how the trick is done—and, actually, we *do* know how—but knowing how it is done, and doing it, are two altogether different things.

The last time we were out with Maxwell Grant, the gang got together an informal "quizz" program. It was so interesting that we asked Maxwell Grant to jot down a few of the things that we could pass on to you. So, if you want to spend a few minutes checking up on your general knowledge, and your ability to spot a "catch" in a question, just look over these few:

COIN TEST

This is a test of arithmetical ability. You know the total value of certain coins

and you know how many coins there are. The problem is to discover how many of each kind there are. Allow two minutes for the solution.

1. If six coins total thirty-eight cents, the six coins will consist of:
—twenty-five-cent pieces
—ten-cent pieces
—five-cent pieces
—one-cent pieces

2. If six coins total twenty-seven cents, the six coins will consist of:
—twenty-five-cent pieces
—ten-cent pieces
—five-cent pieces
—one-cent pieces

3. If six coins total seventy-six cents, the six coins will consist of:
—twenty-five-cent pieces
—ten-cent pieces
—five-cent pieces
—one-cent pieces

WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

This test involves a certain amount of acquired knowledge of geography. Answer each question by underlining the proper word.

Time limit four minutes.

(1) Which of the following countries does not border upon France?
Spain, Italy, Germany, Greece, Belgium.

(2) Which of the following States does not border upon Pennsylvania?
New York, Virginia, New Jersey, Ohio, Delaware.

(3) Which of the following rivers does not empty into the Mississippi?
Missouri, Potomac, Ohio, Illinois, Arkansas.

(4) Which of the following rivers empties into the Pacific Ocean?
Delaware, Mississippi, Columbia, Hudson, St. Lawrence.

(5) Which of the following countries is in Central America?
Salvador, Chile, Burma, Brazil, Korea.

(6) Which of the following States is east of the Mississippi River?
Missouri, Mississippi, Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas.

ANAGRAM VERSES

Anagrams are words that are spelled with the same letters, differently arranged: for example, RAM, ARM, MAR.

In the following verse, the missing

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words are anagrams, *all* spelled with the same letters. If you can guess the right word appropriate for any space, you will thereby gain a clue to the remaining words that are needed.

Come, landlord! Fill the flowing ————
Until their ————— run over;
For in this ————, tonight, we'll ————;
Tomorrow ————— to Dover!

The missing words are spelled with the same four letters, differently arranged.

A solemn old ————————— of Cadiz
Once ————————— some young Spanish ladies.
To ————————— him, they chucked
A ————————— that he ducked;
Which ————————— those young ladies of Cadiz.

The missing words are spelled with the same seven letters, differently arranged.

After you've tried yourself on them, turn to the end of this department, and you'll find the answers there.

The Keyhole, our old friend, the newspaperman who doesn't mind taking a hand in crime when it becomes necessary, is with us again. This odd newspaper character, written by Alan Hathway, has gotten us reams of letters in his previous appearances. The mail that comes from newspapermen is especially interesting, because, as they say, everything in the story sounds so real and true to life.

That's not unusual, since Hathway has spent all his life on newspaper work, and is well known to the newspaper profession around New York City. He has worked on one of the city's largest dailies for a good many years, having come East from his original home in Michigan. Right about now, Hathway is doing his annual pondering about summer vacation, when he moves his family out to Fire Island, which is along the

the next issue, great yarns. There's another Jim Strong story by Frank Gruber, "Death Going Up." There's a lot of bellboy and elevator-man atmosphere in this one, and it comes from the past experience Gruber has had, for he served as a bellhop and elevator man in a large, exclusive club. Some of the experiences he had were extremely amusing.

Gruber has been getting a great deal of excellent publicity in the past few months because of his new book, "The French Key," which has stayed up in the first-three of mystery books since its publication. The book got off to a good start by winning the Farrar and Rinehart mystery colphon with an honorable mention in their contest. Even before it was published, the Book of the Month Club placed it on their recommended list. And its sales, right from the start, went zooming so high that it will, without a doubt, be the year's top seller in mystery stories. That is quite an honor, of course, and having worked with Gruber for quite a few years, and watched him go ever upward in the ranking of today's writers, we get a special kick out of seeing him land on the top! Our readers, we know, feel the same way.

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. . . this issue. The story starts on Page 75, and if you happen to start reading it late at night, you'll keep on until you finish, regardless of the midnight oil. Carrie is more than ever up to her clever tricks, with Alec, her fine-looking partner, in with her at all times.

Here are the answers to the questions propounded by Maxwell Grant up earlier in this department. After you've checked on the answers, turn to Page 38 and read the Norgil story, "Too Many Ghosts," for some nice entertainment in the style that only Maxwell Grant can handle so well.

COIN TEST

1. One, zero, two, three.
2. Zero, one, three, two.
3. Two, two, one, one.

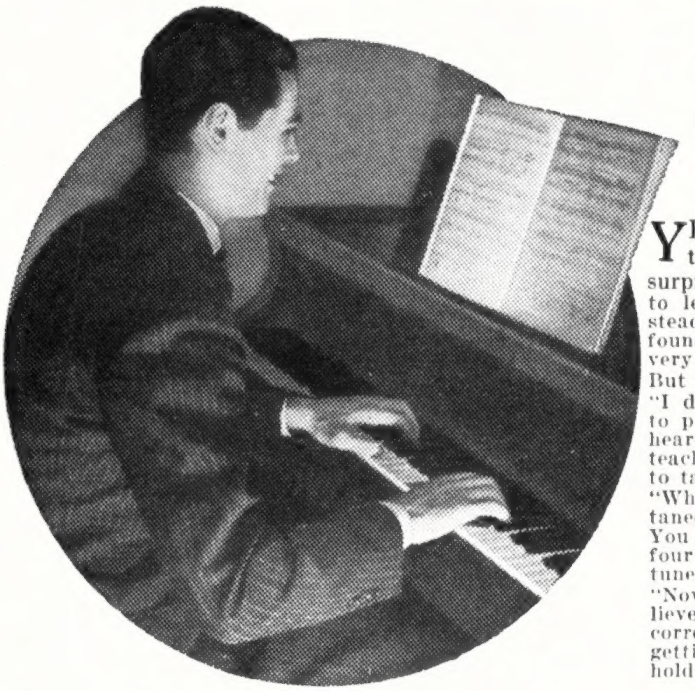
WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

(1) Greece (2) Virginia (3) Potomac
(4) Columbia (5) Salvador (6) Mississippi

ANAGRAM VERSES

(1) POTS, TOPS, SPOT, STOP, POST.
(2) GRANDEE, ANGERED, DERANGE, GRENADE, ENRAGED.

DIDN'T DREAM HE COULD LEARN MUSIC WITHOUT A TEACHER



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(Signed) * H. C. S., *Calif.*

Read How Thousands Have Learned to Play Their Favorite Instruments! Free Proof that You Can, Too

Wouldn't Take $1000 for Course
The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.
*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.

Plays on Radio
I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.
* W. H. S., Alabama.

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The manner in which the various lessons are explained is very helpful as well as interesting. It makes one feel that the explanation is being given in person.
* W. W., Florida.

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